

A The government's finally going to do something about all the recent shark attacks. The coast of New South Wales is going to be patrolled by drones and 4G listening stations to track tagged sharks and protect beachgoers.

B And does this new technology also protect the beachgoers from huge dumping waves? Does it divert rips? Because those things are just as dangerous for them too.

A No, of course not, but there's been a rise in the shark population and that's meant an increase in the number of shark attacks.

B But the same thing happened in Western Australia in 2011 and 2012

A You do know that there have been thirteen attacks including one death off the north coast of New South Wales just this year.

B When I heard about the attacks, I read up a little about the problem. There may be an increase in shark attacks, but in fact great white sharks are an endangered species. If the government lets a few big-game fishermen out into the deeps, they'll get rid of the shark problem, and make them extinct into the bargain.

A But that doesn't make sense if their numbers are increasing.

B The official consensus is that there's no scientific evidence to indicate shark numbers are increasing. And the Australian Shark Attack File says that the increase in Australian shark attacks coincides with the increasing human population, more people visiting beaches, a rise in the popularity of water-based recreational activities, and people going to previously isolated coastal areas. The increase in shark attacks over the past two decades is consistent with international statistics of shark attacks increasing annually because there are more people in the water.

A But we still have to do something about making beaches safe for swimmers and surfers. People are terrified and surfers are travelling up to Surfers Paradise rather than go into the water here, so the New South Wales tourism industry is being battered.

B But how selfish humans really are, to think that the effects on tourism are as essential as protecting endangered species. We so easily forget that great white sharks are global citizens too. The reality of this spate of attacks is that people don't know enough about shark activity. Like many other sharks, the much-feared bull and tiger sharks plunge to depths of over a kilometre and travel mind-boggling distances. But exactly how they navigate their journeys or why they make them isn't even close to being understood by science. Sharks travel in clusters and these clusters are transitory, they come and go. The shark attacks that happened in Western Australia were just a spike and things returned to normal once the sharks moved on.

A So you don't care about the oceans being dangerous for beachgoers?

B Yes and no. Nothing will make our beaches really safe, and the programmes put into place to protect citizens are usually a knee-jerk reaction from politicians who come under immense pressure from a public that is whipped up into a state of near panic by the media. The legacy of such imbecility can be devastating for the ocean's predators.

A But the New South Wales government should take measures similar to those the Western Australian government took.

B In response to the Western Australian cluster, the state government introduced a programme of baited drum lines, ostensibly to catch white sharks. Instead, over one hundred and sixty tiger sharks were hooked and killed, even though there hadn't been a tiger shark fatality in Perth since the 1920s. I wouldn't want the same thing to happen here in New South Wales. Making a large predator like the great white shark extinct can be absolutely devastating on the ecosystem as a whole.

B I think that using drones and 40 listening stations is a good compromise. The drum lines will be equipped with smart apparatus and underwater cameras so that the people monitoring them can intervene rapidly if it's a harmless species that's been caught.

A I just think that we humans have to realise that action taken in the environment has to be well-informed and looked at with real consideration for the long-term consequences. We need to avoid quick short-term responses to unpleasant realities like shark attacks because in the end they put us in a devastating situation.

Outline There has been an increase in the number of shark attacks off the coast of New South Wales which some attribute to a rise in the shark population, but the official consensus is that there is no scientific evidence to indicate shark numbers are increasing. Sharks travel in transitory clusters, and the number of shark attacks returns to normal once the cluster goes away. The increase in Australian shark attacks also coincides with a rise in the popularity of water-based recreational activities, and more people visiting beaches, especially previously isolated coastal areas. Human beings are selfish to think that the effects on tourism are as essential as protecting endangered species. Action taken in the environment has to be well-informed and looked at with real consideration for the long-term consequences.

Questions

1 Why don't the authorities simply decide that people go into the sea at their own risk? 2 Do economic considerations often conflict with environmental concerns? 3 Which is more important, the Earth's ecosystem or human beings' freedom to do whatever they want? 4 Is Australia a country you would like to live and work in ?