REALITY BITES

Five of the biggest myths about sharks

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As summer holidays and the beach beckon, the perennial debate of sharks – and what, if anything, to do about them – inevitably surfaces. This week’s final Senate inquiry report on shark mitigation and deterrent measures has shed some timely science that challenges some widely held myths. Here are the top five addressed in the inquiry.

Myth 1: Sharks target humans
As the federal government notes, the majority of human-shark encounters appear to be the result of a shark confusing the victim with its normal prey.

Daniel Bucher, of the Southern Cross University, noted in his evidence to the inquiry, sharks are opportunistic, apex predators. If they approach humans, it is typically with caution.

“$That is why a lot of the attacks are from behind,”$ he said. Of 180 species of sharks found in Australian waters, about 99 per cent of fatalities have been attributed to just three – great whites, tigers and bulls – the inquiry found.

Myth 2: Shark nets work
Advocates of shark nets like to highlight that of the 47 deaths from shark bites in the past 50 years in Australian waters, all but two were at beaches without mesh. But drawing a causal connection between the two is fraught. In his submission, Chris Pepin-Neff from the University of Sydney noted it is impossible to prove a snared shark would have bitten a human. In fact, the data suggests most sharks were caught during periods when, historically, there were the fewest fatalities.

Dr Pepin-Neff also noted that 40 per cent of sharks were caught on the beach side of the nets.

Myth 3: Sharks make beach activities dangerous
According to the Taronga shark attack file, visits to Australia’s beaches number at least 100 million a year. In 2017, it counted 17 unprovoked or two provoked attacks, with one fatality, in Western Australia. By contrast, 116 people drowned along Australia’s coasts during the year to June 30, a rough 100-1 ratio.

Lifesavers rescued almost 11,000 people during the year. If more money were spent on lifesavers and patrols, “you’d probably save more lives than are killed by sharks”, Rob Brander, from the University of NSW, said.

Myth 4: Shark populations are exploding
Two decades of Commonwealth protection of great whites are unlikely to have resulted in a jump in numbers. White sharks reach sexual maturity at 17 to 20 years of age and have one or two offspring every few years.

Myth 5: Politicians need to respond to shark bites
Research published this week in Marine Policy by Dr Pepin-Neff and Thomas Wynter argues the public may be less anxious for action than politicians assume: “The phrase ‘shark attack’ is intent-laden so it produces a narrative that increases fear even if there is no injury.”

An entangled shark. Photo: Sea Shepherd