

A Chum Slick of Deceit. for AfriOceans by Chris Fallows

April 1991 was a momentous time for great white sharks in South Africa and for that matter all around the world. It was the first time any country had had the foresight to take steps to protect these magnificent predators knowing the importance they played in the eco system. Since 1991 the popularity of this species as a tourism attraction has ballooned beyond anyone's imagination - today upwards of 50 000 people come to South Africa to see these animals alive in the wild.

Year on year this figure grows and this form of eco-tourism represents a industry worth 100's of millions of Rands not only in ticket sales but also to airlines, accommodation, restaurants, car hire, transfer companies curio suppliers, and other tourism ventures the tourists visit after seeing the Great White. Combined these micro industries have created a small economy around this one animal and today it is one of South Africa's unique attractions.

Significantly this burgeoning industry has helped achieve many of the South African Government's key objectives of creating jobs for local communities, bringing foreign revenue into the country, transforming the profile of a tourism industry into one that is representative of the demographics of the country, and generally uplifting communities surrounding these shark ecotourism sites. What makes it even more special is that this is a non-consumptive industry and if well managed it can carry on growing and fulfilling government's mandates infinitum. Logically one would assume that with this industry's track record of, coupled with significant drops in tourism across the board in many other sectors, an economy that is struggling, and a global recession that threatens, any growth in tourism going forward will be well managed by those tasked to do so. Protecting the golden goose, which is the Great White Shark in this case, would surely be a priority to them. However, although grand websites and articles suggest that the South African government is a leader in shark conservation, this is definitely not the case.

The Department of Agriculture, Forests and Fisheries (DAFF, formerly Marine and Coastal Management) seems to want to have nothing to do with managing the enforcement of the laws set out to protect this animal. Indeed it is almost an impossible task to find out exactly who is supposed to be looking after these animals by enforcing the law.

Having been involved with working with these Great Whites since 1991 at all three well known sites in South Africa , especially Seal Island in False Bay and Gansbaai's Dyer Island, we have a very good idea of population growth rates, size ranges and any other variable that might indicate a suggested growth in the population since protection as some have suggested. Our observations and data suggest a very different picture and a slight decrease in population is clearly seen. A decrease in the average size of sharks is also noticeably apparent and very few mature sharks are seen now as opposed to 10 years ago. Being apex predators there were never huge numbers of these sharks to start with therefore even the removal of a few large sharks has a significant influence on the wellbeing of the population.

Since the mid nineties we know of over 20 great whites that have been killed by questionable means, some having their fins or jaws removed. Although this has been brought to the attention of law enforcement, to date not one person has been prosecuted or even arrested.

The Natal Sharks Board still kill between 11-60 great white sharks per year , the largest single known orchestrated slaughter of the species in the world. In addition, shark longlines, which incredulously are still allowed in South African waters, kill an unknown quantity of these "protected" animals each year.

What has however become a highly visible and, what one would think, easy to-police-problem, is the illegal sport fishing for Great White Sharks from boats and also from popular beaches in South Africa.

Two ski boat anglers from Struisbaai and False Bay have been implicated in this fishery. A simple Google search yields plenty evidence of this illegal fishery that has continued for over 20 years since the great white was protected.

<http://www.big-game-board.info/english-spoken-section/worldwide-saltwater-fishing/south-africa/848-great-white-sharks-release-fishery/>

<http://www.sportfishing.co.za/charters/>

Nobody in South Africa has a permit to catch and release these sharks. More and more animals in various states of health and injury are showing up at our vessel around Seal Island, False Bay, either having large hooks embedded in their mouths, long pieces of steel trace trailing out their gills or mouths, or severely cut and ripped fins from where those that have survived have rolled on traces and snapped them.

Roughly five years ago a television series called Extreme Sport Angling started in South Africa, which became very popular especially for showing people how to catch large sharks. One method shown was to use a one way sliding swivel that allowed you to send massive baits further out into the surf than what it would be possible to cast them. Suddenly and regularly Great White Sharks were being caught and in some instances killed by these shore anglers. There was evidence of this for all to see as even the host of the show hauled a great white shark up onto the beach before releasing it - completely illegal.

Since then certainly hundreds of great whites have been hooked and manhandled in this way, sometimes even gaffed. In Mossel Bay and False Bay it was not uncommon to see several anglers trying to catch Great Whites at known locations on a single day. If an official looking person asked what they were fishing for they would say sharks, if a member of the public asked then they would proudly say Great Whites.

Ignorance was clearly not a factor, these guys were targeting great whites, and what's more they were landing them. Whether they were breaking the law or not was of no concern.

Quickly a large percentage of the white shark population along our coast were hooked and on a 3-week trip to Mossel Bay in 2009 at least 30% of the sharks we saw bore testament to this capture. It must be made clear however that a large percentage of the angling community is vehemently against fishing for great whites but the sad truth is that there are those few individuals who are giving the majority a poor name and doing a lot of damage to the sharks.

The biggest problem, however, is the apathy shown by the enforcement officials tasked with dealing with this issue. Since the problem started it was made known to the department. One official after another dodged the issue. Their attitude is that it's just a job to them and what's the big deal in protecting a shark anyway? Telephone calls made to the department whilst a shark was being fought and the perpetrator was easy to catch were ignored on numerous occasions. Calls directly to the head of enforcement were never answered to the point of being a complete waste of time. In the most recent case in Mossel Bay where pictures of the illegal capture, gaffing of the shark onto rocks and blood pouring from the gills of the shark were blazed across the front page of Cape Town's biggest newspaper, there still has been no action taken against this serial offender.

<http://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.10150316871445755.334618.19135095754&type=3>

Amazingly some anglers proudly brag of catching 10 or more great whites on their blogs. This illegal fishing takes place right out in the open off very popular beaches, often with big baits being cast right amongst bathers and even here it can't be policed. What chance then is there of stopping the illegal poaching of white sharks that is said to take place in the Dyer Island Channel at night or from False Bay's known white shark locations for the jaws and fins that are exported as part of illegal abalone shipments?

What chance if there of getting shark longlining or finning stopped off our coast when it takes place out of sight of land?

South Africa, our beautiful country where so many come to look at the incredible diversity of marine and terrestrial animals hides dark secrets just offshore as tens of thousands of sharks are legally killed on long lines and probably at least as many are finned and thrown back into the oceans alive to die as no measures are taken to prosecute those found guilty. Ironically 2011 was a momentous year for shark conservation around the world with shark fins being banned in many major cities, longlining being outlawed in major tracts of the world's oceans, and various countries declaring tracts of ocean the size of large countries as shark reserves.

It appears for every stride other countries take forward South Africa takes one back when it comes to shark conservation with poaching, longlining, and illegal sport fishing being the order of the day. Despite the efforts of conservationists, researchers, responsible anglers and a few shark ecotourism operators to bring the killing to an end, the government and political will power in South Africa seems to be happy to hide behind paper laws and keep blowing smoke. Clearly what has been set out in government's mandates of creating jobs, increasing tourism and maintaining biodiversity in our oceans are just words to keep waters calm. South Africa's Great White Shark is the centre jewel in the crown of successful marine ecotourism stories but sadly for how much longer remains to be seen. Unless there is a major shake up and wake up amongst those tasked with managing, enforcing and protecting this valuable and environmentally important resource South Africa will be yet another country on the "once had" list of those that now have none.