

Chum in the Water

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"In the twilight of July 1, 1916, 25-year-old Charles Vansant bled to death in a beachfront hotel in New Jersey. Several men had pulled his maimed body from the water" ignorant to the cause of such malicious wounds. Two weeks later, three more people were dead (McCall). In 1975, a masterful, visceral and realistic science-fiction, suspense/horror-disaster film was released onto the silver screen -- one that tapped into the most primal of human fears (Dirks). *Jaws* dominated the box office and gave birth to a new perspective of sharks that paralleled with a deadly stereotype—one that is killing sharks by the millions every year. The stereotype of sharks today is due to the media's influence over shark's behavior, thus creating a significant fear of the species in the general public. In turn, this fear reduces a lack of compassion for the mysterious fish, making conservation efforts problematic.

One hundred and two years ago in 1916, the "New Jersey Shark Attacks" commenced the beginning of a mass-media stereotype that continues to cling to sharks today. When the attacks occurred, people were skeptical. At this time, people were fairly certain that sharks could not bite people. People knew sharks ate the flesh of other ocean creatures but there was dispute over whether they would—or could—bring down a human. What were once thought to be frightening-looking yet essentially benevolent animals became man-eating predators (McCall). And so began the fear of sharks. This new attitude brought us *Jaws*, the 1974 Best Seller novel written by Peter Benchley, and a year later, one of the first and greatest horror films ever made. The novel and film were based on these real-life Jersey attacks and thus a very real and terrifying antagonist emerged. *Jaws* embodied the ultimate stereotype placed on sharks and captured that violent image in such a convincing way that it laid the stepping stones for future movies, books, TV shows, and even news reports to portray sharks in a monstrous light. The trailer of *Jaws* proceeds with the epitome of the stereotype, when the narrator expresses the following to viewers:

There is a creature alive today who has survived millions of years of evolution without change, without passion, and without logic. It lives to kill. A mindless eating machine, it will attack and devour anything. It is as though God created the devil and gave us – JAWS. (*IMDb*)

In *Jaws*, Spielberg's ingenious mechanical shark, respectively named "Bruce," devoured his human prey whole and demolished a sturdy fishing boat while swimming in his victim's blood, capturing the man-eating label perfectly (Dirks). Because Bruce malfunctioned ninety percent of the time during production, the twenty-five-foot shark would have lacked intimidation without John Williams' iconic, two-noted music progression. In

order to help save the film, Spielberg was counting on Williams to create a strong score that would produce a dark and sweeping identity for the shark. The score was meant to match the increasing blood pressure of the shark, representing its internalized zeal before attacking its unlucky targets. Even if a fin appeared from the water, if William's "duh-dumm" theme was not heard, then there was no reason to worry or panic (*Filmtracks*).

Researchers have found a connection between horror movie music and the screeches of young frightened animals. It is believed there are biologically-ingrained reasons why sudden, dissonant sounds and minor chords, like the Williams's "duh-duh" cords in *Jaws*, make humans apprehensive. These off-setting noises trigger a naturally rooted response by making us think our young are threatened, thus producing anxiety (Haggin). Alongside the predatory label placed on sharks, *Jaws* triggered in us the fear of these fish with two musical notes that continue to produce high torment whenever heard. However, *Jaws* is not the only source of highly publicized media to have slandered the image of sharks.

Films that have plots paralleling an overly carnivorous shark antagonizing humans have titles that reflect the negativity and violence that the sharks in the films portray. Films such as *Sharknado* (2013), *Jaws of Death* (1976), *Red Water* (2003), *Deep Blue Sea* (1999), *The Shallows* (2016), and *Blue Demon* (2004) all suggest villainous sharks (Thompson). Child-based films with antagonist sharks include *The Little Mermaid* and *Finding Nemo*.

In *The Little Mermaid*, Ariel and Flounder explore a shipwreck, but they encounter a horrific shark that attacks them. The shark's eyes are yellow and red; suggesting the archetype of devilish tendencies and horror. The shark's mouth and teeth are overly exaggerated to give off a monstrous identity and produce fear in the audience. This Disney depiction teaches children that sharks are blood-thirsty predators that will eat anything in their paths. However, in contrast, *Finding Nemo's* "Bruce" (named after Spielberg's machine) is a well-known and even well-liked character in the film. Because *Finding Nemo* is a family/children's film, Bruce's appearance is made to draw children's attention to his gigantic girth, toothy grin, and beady eyes. These physical aspects highlight the stereotypical shark-image that the media has shaped. However, in contrast to his appearance, Bruce's personality —despite being unpredictable—is friendly. His welcoming character is clearly displayed during the "shark meeting" inside the sunken submarine where Bruce and his two companions, Anchor, and Chum, recite their motto.

I am a nice shark, not a mindless eating machine.

If I am to change this image, I must first change myself. Fish are friends, not food. (*Finding Nemo*)

This motto directly relates back to the opening trailer of *Jaws* and suggests that Disney is trying to alter the perception of a shark's behavior by twisting the stereotype

the media has always placed on sharks. However, after smelling blood, Bruce's friendly façade disappears. He turns violent when his primal instincts take over, demonstrating his blood-thirstiness and exemplifying the shark stereotype once more. In the media, it is not only films that have cast sharks' images into the dark depths of society's nightmares, but TV shows also contribute to sharks' downfall.

For the past twenty-seven years, Discovery Channel has ruled the airways for a week in late June or early July to shower a cascade of shark documentaries onto the public. At its best, *Shark Week* educates viewers about the most misunderstood animals on the planet, while inspiring them to protect the oceans. However, at its worst, *Shark Week* does the opposite: perpetuating fear and misunderstanding. "The absolute worst of *Shark Week* did not just sensationalize the reality of sharks; it mockumentary-ized it, using fake experts and videos in specials such as 'Megalodon: The Monster Lives.' Viewers reacted strongly to this specific special due to the fact that there was not a shred of relative evidence that suggested that megalodons exist, and yet the show aired in the context of an educational TV channel" (Shiffman). Discovery Channel's revered *Shark Week* also aired plenty of specials focusing on sharks attacking people, but many of the sharks on the specials, such as "Ten Deadliest Species of Sharks" have never been associated with a single human fatality. The *American Elasmobranch Society*, the world's largest professional organization of shark scientists, has urged social media style guides to retire the phrase "shark-attack" in favor of more accurate and less inflammatory words scaled to real risks and outcomes, such as "shark/human encounters" or "interaction" (Shiffman).

In regards to real risks and outcomes, Discovery states in their *Shark Week* website that "Rather than being afraid of sharks, people should be afraid of sharks, as their populations are seriously threatened." Despite *Shark Week's* fabricated specials, the ultimate goal of the week-long spectacle is to promote conservation efforts for sharks and bring awareness to sharks' depleting numbers. Discovery quotes that "There is no *Shark Week* without sharks. Sharks are disappearing. Scientists have seen crucial populations drop 90 percent in just one generation. Together, we CAN protect them through national and international efforts and to ban the trade of shark fins." This statement summarizes the problematic decline of sharks and highlights the fact that sharks are creatures that need to be protected. The media, perhaps unknowingly, has caused misunderstandings about sharks' behavior -- contributing to a lack of knowledge about different types of sharks, which thus threatens the existence of the species as a whole.

Sharks of all shapes and sizes are apex predators; playing a critical role in the ecosystems they inhabit. If sharks became extinct, the populations of crustaceans, fish, and marine mammals could increase dramatically, setting off a 'cascading' effect, whereupon the entire

ecosystem could collapse (Collier). Many species sit at the top of the food chain, keeping other marine animal populations in check. Some sharks feed on the sick and weak, helping prey populations stay healthy (Edmonds). Due to media influences, people visualize sharks as demons from the depths rather than a vital part of the oceans' balance of the food chain. It is because of this media warp and misunderstanding that sharks' importance is not widely known. According to the *International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)*, shark populations have been on a rapid decline due to overfishing, environmental loss, finning, and pollution. Still, some sharks have fared better than others, landing them on the *IUCN's* endangered species list.

One species of shark that is on the *IUCN's* "Red List of Threatened Species" is the *Rhincodon typus* or whale shark. Whale sharks are known around the world as being gentle giants, as they are the world's largest living fish, but its name perceives it to be a whale-sized, toothy predator—again highlighting the stereotype that just the word "shark" implies teeth and danger. The whale shark is a magnificent creature to behold. In its average 100-120 year lifespan it can grow to be sixty feet long, weighing more than a few school buses combined (WWF). However, due to its gentle nature, slow moving speed, large size, and long maturation development, it is easy prey for international fishing industries and illegal trading (*The Nature Conservancy*). Unlike many of its flesh-eating distant relatives of shark species, whale sharks are filter feeders; their large 5-foot mouths engulf and filter water through their gills to pick out plankton (WWF). This shark is not a man-eating shark; rather, it is completely friendly with people, but nonetheless, its name and large size still produce anxiety for those who may not be familiar with the species. Whale sharks, like many other sharks, are poorly understood due to their rarity and irregular migration patterns, thus hindering conservationists' abilities to protect them. Despite their uniqueness, the whale sharks' magnificence is often overlooked by the ocean's most popular, but also most misunderstood predator: the great white shark.

The *Carcharodon carcharias*, or great white shark, has dominated the media's stereotype of the man-eating monster that lurks beneath the ocean's surface. The great white is the largest predatory fish on the earth. According to E. O. Wilson, an American biologist, researcher, theorist and author, great whites are a "... a top carnivore, a killing machine, and the last free predator of man—the most frightening animal on earth" (*Marinebio*). However, this common perception of these increasingly threatened animals is changing as we disregard portrayals of them in traditional media, and learn more about them with the help of technology and social media.

As waterproof video cameras, GoPros, become more popular, people are increasingly filming these massive beasts—and expanding scientists' views on the upper limit for white shark size and their unpredictable mannerisms. The massive popularity of social media

has also increased awareness and conservation efforts for the depleting numbers of white sharks. Christopher Lowe, a shark biologist at *California State University in Long Beach*, states that this new technology and use of social media is the thing that has changed the game for sharks today. He's hoping education will help limit injuries at the beach and generally prevent people from freaking out when they see a fin in the water (*Long Beach Press-Telegram*). Social media's involvement with conservation efforts was demonstrated clearly in 2015, off the western coast of Mexico's Baja California, Guadalupe Island's biologist Mauricio Hoyos Padilla posted a Facebook video of what he claims is the biggest great white shark ever filmed: an approximately twenty-foot long female dubbed Deep Blue. Most great whites are around twelve to fourteen feet long. Deep Blue, despite her length, was also thought to have been very pregnant due to the size of her massive girth and was thus pronounced the largest shark ever filmed. The video went viral, and Hoyos Padilla—as well as Lowe—believe that Deep Blue's video, as well as more knowledge of sharks, can help dispel some of their myths. "For one, the majority of white sharks won't immediately swim up and attack you," says Lowe. The video captures Deep Blue nonchalantly gliding next to a diver on top of a cage. She is just curious and is instinctually investigating the odd creatures in her waters (Wei-Haas). Sharks are believed to purposely attack humans due to the films that have falsified their behaviors, when really, if they do attack, it is usually a case of mistaken identity.

The *National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)* explains that sharks do not normally hunt humans. Assuming a large, predatory shark has not been exposed to human flesh before, it is probably used to biting into thick-tissued, fatty sea lions, seals and similar-bodied prey. Surfers and swimmers can mistakenly be depicted as a shark's normal kill due to their similar size and shape and sometimes sharks will investigate potential food items by taking a taste. Unfortunately, given their many rows of sharp teeth, a few shark species can cause an individual to bleed to death with just a single bite. (Discovery). The majority of shark attacks leave victims with serious lacerations and possibly detached limbs, since sharks, like dogs, instinctively grab and roughly shake their prey with their teeth before killing it. Contrary to what brutal shark films suggest, this powerful fish does not eat people whole. If a shark mistakenly bites a human, it will normally release the individual, and swim away (Discovery). This behavior is evident when analyzing shark-human encounters.

The *International Shark Attack File (ISAF)* investigated 155 incidents of alleged shark-human interaction occurring worldwide in 2017. Eighty-eight cases represent confirmed unprovoked shark attacks on humans. Thirty of the remaining cases were confirmed as provoked attacks on humans. "Unprovoked attacks" are defined as incidents where an attack on a live human

occurs in the shark's natural habitat with no human provocation of the shark. "Provoked attacks" occur when a human initiates physical contact with a shark, e.g. a diver is bitten after grabbing a shark, attacks on spearfishers and those feeding sharks, bites occurring while unhooking or removing a shark from a fishing net, etc. Of the remaining thirty cases, eighteen involved bites to motorized or non-motorized marine vessels ("boat attacks"), two involved shark-inflicted post-mortem bites ("scavenge"), four were cases in which the shark-human interaction could not be confirmed based on the available data, and one case involved a diver in a public aquarium (French). On average, there is less than one shark-attack death every two years in the United States, according to records. Almost 6,000 people die from tripping and falling at home each year, thus highlighting the outrageous over-publicization by the media of shark attacks when the chances of being attacked by a shark are slim to none (WNYY). However, with the increasing global climate, more people are likely to be at beaches where shark migration patterns and their food sources are most prevalent. Peter Benchley, the author of the 1974 novel *Jaws*, stated that "We provoke a shark every time we enter the water where sharks happen to be, for we forget: The ocean is not our territory - it's theirs." Regardless of shark's dominance on the oceanic food chain, they are becoming an increasingly popular menu choice for their top predator: Humans.

Protecting sharks from finning has become a topic of discussion in many countries, but China and other Asian countries continue selling shark fin soup, despite the recent uproar. Shark finning is the number one reason why shark species have drastically plummeted in the past century (*Stop Shark Finning*). In the Ming Dynasty, shark fin soup was only served to the elite class and the Emperor, symbolizing wealth. The demand for shark fins has increased massively, in line with China's enlarged prosperity, primarily due to the cultural identity paralleled with the fins and the symbol of fortune the soup offers (Fairclough). Most sharks mature in seven to fourteen years, making their numbers recover slowly from overfishing. It does not take much imagination to see the devastating impact that this menu choice has on shark populations (*Stop Shark Finning*). The majority of the Chinese media does not display the negative impact shark fin soup has on the global scale of shark populations, thus contributing to the fact that media has a tremendous amount of influence on the way people see sharks and what can or cannot be done for them. Because the soup is a symbol of prosperity and is a delicacy, people have the opportunity to gain a better social class reputation by eating it. However, this appetizer is rapidly killing sharks to the point that it is wiping them off the face of the earth:

Sharks have survived for 450 million years and yet we are on course for killing them off within a few years. If finning continues, there will be no more shark fin soup, other seafood species will disappear, and the oceans will no longer support

the healthy balance of sea life that we need to survive. (*WildAid*)

China and other countries that divulge in the "delicacy" of eating shark fins in broth are only contributing to the loss of the environment. If the media does not speak out strongly on the subject in these finning countries, it is only a matter of time before all hope is lost for sharks. The correlation is evident between the media's role in creating a negative stereotype for sharks, the lack of public compassion for the species, and sharks' depleting numbers.

Sharks have always been the dominant predators in the oceanic food chain, but within the duration of one hundred-and-two years since the 1916 "New Jersey Shark Attacks," their existence has scared the human race into believing that they are demons swimming below the surface of any water source. The media's influence on sharks' persona correlates with the lack of conversation efforts and the general acceptance of certain cultures turning sharks into human prey by making cultural cuisine's out of them. However, within the last ten years due to the influx of social media and the internet, conservation efforts for the fish are expanding, and their numbers beginning to increase. The film industry is slowly fading out of the "Jaws era" and documentaries on sharks' behaviors are becoming widespread. Hoyos Padilla, who captured the largest shark on film, wrote on *Facebook*, "When I saw Deep Blue for the first time, there was just one thought in my mind: Hope" (Padilla).

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