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OCEANS RESEARCH

PRESS RELEASE

MAN ILLEGALLY CATCHES A GREAT WHITE SHARK IN MOSSSEL BAY

16th October, 2011: Mossel Bay — Man illegally catches a Great White Shark

On Friday 14th October 2011, Oceans Research received a phone call from local members of the community regarding an incident that was taking place at Beacon Point in Mossel Bay. A fisherman was in the process of catching a great white shark and was hauling it onto the rocks. In South Africa, the white shark is a protected species, and if one is inadvertently hooked then it must be immediately released.

Ryan Johnson, a scientist from Oceans Research rushed down to the location to discover the fisherman still had the shark out of the water; was making no effort to return it to the water and was instead posing for photographs being taken by his two companions assumed to be his sons. Simultaneously, Oceans Research scientist, Enrico Gennari, telephoned the local fisheries inspector from the Department of Forestry and Fisheries (DAFF), who assured Gennari that he was going to make his way to the location to investigate (the DAFF offices are situated less than 1 kilometer from the fishing location).

On arrival, Ryan Johnson confronted the fisherman and informed him that he was breaking the law, that the great white is a protected species, and asked the fisherman to move away from the shark to enable Johnson to return it to the Ocean. Assisted by a member of the community, Johnson returned the shark to the water by waiting for large enough swells to arrive and take some of the shark's weight. Following release into the water, the shark rolled onto its side, righted itself, bumped into a rock and swam out of sight. It is impossible to know whether the shark will survive this ordeal.

Following the incidence, Johnson and the fisherman argued passionately. When asked whether he knew that fishing great whites was illegal, the fisher responded "so what, you (Johnson) drink and drive, everyone does things illegal so what is the big deal?"

The fisherman then started to pack up his equipment and move it to his cars with the aid of the two young men assumed to be his sons. This equipment included a kayak, which presumably was used to paddle out and place the massive baits and tackle, as they were too large to cast. The entire fishing set up was designed to catch very large sharks, and it was clear that the fisherman's intent was to target and catch white sharks, a protected species.

Johnson waited at the site for 20 minutes whilst the fishers packed up and left. Unfortunately no compliance officer arrived by the time that the fishers left. When Oceans Research attempted to

telephone the inspector again, his cell phone was off and as far as is known, he never arrived at the scene of the offence.

In the past four years Oceans Research has routinely identified fishermen targeting and catching white sharks in Mossel Bay. During almost every public holiday, fishermen from Cape Town and other major metros appear in the small Mossel Bay community armed with the latest shark fishing kit and place massive hooks and bait in areas known to be congregation sites for white sharks. Whilst fishing used to occur in the evenings and early morning when detection would be unlikely, in recent years the lack of any enforcement has resulted in fishing becoming increasingly brazen. According to the Mossel Bay community, people like this fisherman bring shame to the recreational angling sport as they act in a non-professional manner, and isolate themselves from the majority of the angling community which recognise the importance of these apex predators in the marine ecosystem.

South Africa has a proud history of conserving and responsibly managing white sharks. However, in recent years, the increase in sport fishing for sharks has resulted in an increase in the targeting for this protected species. Whilst many sport fishing clubs are dedicated to fishing responsibly and within the laws, rogue fisherman routinely target and catch great whites in South Africa. To date not one reported incident has ever led to a prosecution. Why is that? Ryan Johnson believes that it is related to legislation. *“The difficulty in prosecuting and investigating such cases, is that fisherman officially claim that they are not targeting white sharks (when questioned) despite unofficially admitting they are targeting white sharks in social media sites such as Facebook. Despite being equipped with tackle designed to capture sharks as large as white sharks, fishing in locations that are known great white aggregation sites, the authorities claim that ‘intent’ cannot be sufficiently established to lead to a successful prosecution”*. He also notes that *“Despite law stating that fishermen inadvertently hooking white sharks must cut them free as soon as they are identified, the fishermen in question refuse to do this as they claim it is more responsible to land the shark, take the hook out and then release it (after taking a bunch of snap shots) - It is a very convenient loop-hole for rogue fishermen”*.

What occurs in an environment where there are no consequences for breaking environmental laws? People believe they have a free reign and thus ignore legislation. So, are white sharks protected in South Africa? If protection extends only to the signing of legislation, then yes. If protection means actually keeping white sharks safe in South Africa, then the answer is no, they are not adequately protected. Without immediate action against this practise, South Africa’s reputation for responsible environmental policy is in danger of being eroded. We are the ambassadors of one of the oceans most iconic yet vulnerable species; it is time for us to seize this responsibility.

Oceans Research would like to thank the concerned members of the Mossel Bay community who reported this incident to Oceans Research and assisted in the release of the shark. White sharks are a unique natural asset that adds significant value to Mossel Bay, it is up to residents to ensure that our environmental integrity is protected. We would urge for anyone who witnesses this behaviour in the future to contact Oceans Research and local authorities immediately. Oceans Research can be reached by phoning 044 690 5799 or contacting the local DAFF inspectors.ju