



Predator as prey

Great white sharks are an endangered species, but there are some people who still think it's cool to hunt them

WITH fewer than 3 500 left in the ocean, great white sharks are now more endangered than tigers — yet rogue fishermen are still hunting them down and posing next to their bodies like frustrated great white hunters.

Ryan Johnson, National Geographic presenter and marine biologist with Mossel Bay's Oceans Research, spoke to Green Life about the problem in the aftermath of the latest shock incident.

It's illegal to catch great white sharks, yet you recently caught Leon Bekker (pictured below), a fisherman from George, happily posing for pictures next to a severely injured great white on the rocks of Mossel Bay. What was his reaction when you confronted him? Oceans Research received a call from a member of public, who said there was a man catching a great white. When I arrived, Bekker was posing with the shark while the public and his colleagues were taking photographs of him.

I confronted him and told him what he was doing was illegal, that the great white is a protected species, and that he needed to move back because I was going to release it. Helped by a community member, I manoeuvred the shark back into the sea, although it had been out of the water for 15 minutes without any ventilation and was being treated brutally, so I'm not optimistic that it survived.

The first thing Bekker said to me was: "I can smell alcohol on your breath, you're drunk." He tried to justify his illegal action by falsely accusing me of also doing something illegal, but that wasn't going to deter me from exposing his behaviour.

You took many photographs of Bekker crouching next to the great white — an excellent incentive, one would think, for the authorities to take action?

Initially the reaction was very poor. We phoned the local inspector with the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries who said he'd come to the scene straight away, but he didn't turn up and when we called him again his phone was turned off. However, the response by the Department of Environmental Affairs was very good — they sent out two very committed inspectors, who are now preparing to prosecute Bekker after we gave them all our evidence. Public pressure has also been a great help.

Why is it illegal to catch great whites in

SA, but not other shark species?

Female great whites breed very slowly and have few offspring. Although they seem conspicuous in South Africa because of the cage-diving industry, they would become extinct very quickly if they were exposed to fishing. Other shark species aren't protected because they potentially breed faster, although, perhaps, they're just not considered as iconic as great whites.

How serious is the problem of illegal shark fishing among recreational anglers in South Africa?

Within the sport-fishing community you have rogue elements, people who intentionally come to areas where they know great whites congregate, such as Mossel Bay, throw in the biggest tackle, pull out the sharks and mistreat them. But it's very, very difficult to prove that people are intentionally targeting great whites: if you've accidentally caught one, you must release it immediately.

But that's a convenient loophole in the law, and probably one of the things that makes it difficult for the authorities to prosecute. Officially, when questioned, these fishermen claim they're not targeting great whites, but unofficially, on their Facebook pages and around town, they admit they're really coming to Mossel Bay to catch these sharks.

Have any reported incidents ever led to prosecution in South Africa? No.

● Speaking in the press, Bekker has denied catching the shark, claiming it had washed up on the rocks.

Report any illegal shark fishing by calling Oceans Research on 044 690 5799.

TELL US: What's a fitting punishment for anyone caught abusing South Africa's great white sharks?

E-mail tiara.greenlife@gmail.com

Green Life would like to publish your photos. Have you recently photographed anyone catching sharks illegally? Or anything else our readers should see? If so, e-mail the details of the incident and original photographs to tiara.greenlife@gmail.com.



HOW MANY GREAT WHITES LEFT IN THE OCEAN?

A 2010 study by Stanford University's Hopkins Marine Station found that there are fewer than 3 500 great whites left on Earth. If that's true, that's terrifying: it's certainly not a whole lot of shark for 361-million square kilometres of ocean. It also means no country has a bigger responsibility to conserve the great white shark than South

Africa: according to Ryan Johnson, head scientist at Oceans Research, there could be up to 2 000 great whites in our waters. But these estimates are not definite — some are so old they date back to research by the Natal Sharks Board in 1996. "About five institutions are working on a central database using photo identification," says Johnson. "That's probably six months to a year off, but once we have all that, we'll get solid population estimates."