

The West Australian

Scientists test bubbles to scare sharks

ANGELA POWNALL The West Australian
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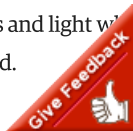
Testing ground: WA scientists at work in South Africa. Picture: Supplied

A group of scientists are now in South Africa to test new potential deterrents, as well as existing electrical deterrent devices, on a large resident great white shark population there.

The University of WA academics, who are funded by the State Government, are testing the sharks' reactions to bubbles, sounds and bright flashing lights underwater.

Lead investigator Shaun Collin said they expected to encounter up to 100 great whites during the three-week research trip.

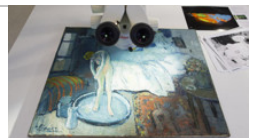
"We have had large numbers of great white sharks interacting with our mid-water rigs, which present sounds, bubbles and light while recording the behaviour of the approaching sharks on stereo camera systems," he said.



Divers could be armed with a device that fires big intense bubbles and beaches could be enveloped with "bubble curtains" to scare off big sharks as WA scientists report some success in tests of innovative shark deterrents.

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"We hope to test whether they can successfully change the behaviour of these large predators, many of which are over 4m in length, and ultimately protect humans."

After five fatal shark attacks in 10 months in WA, the State Government allocated \$646,000 in December 2012 to fund two years of shark deterrent research.

Since then, researchers at UWA's Oceans Institute have been developing the devices and testing them in the laboratory and with sharks off the WA coast.

But the difficulty of finding great whites in WA waters prompted them to go to Mossel Bay, home to the world's most accessible great white shark population, to test the technology.

Professor Collin said they had "some quite encouraging results" with bubbles in WA and hoped to get similar reactions from South African great whites.

He said if the bubbles worked to deter great whites, a bigger compressor could be used to fire off a line of bubbles at a beach when a shark is detected.

Professor Collin said a more personal-based bubble deterrent could also be developed, where "very intense bubbles could be controlled and directed" by divers encountering a shark.

The scientists are also testing the South African great whites' reactions to different two sounds - the call of an orca, one of very few known great white predators, and an artificial sound developed to be uncomfortable for sharks.

The third new possible deterrent being tested is a beacon fitted with flashing bright white LEDs designed to temporarily "semi-blind" sharks that look at it.

"Sharks have receptors in their eye that only operate under dim light so a flashing light of this type will bleach their retina," Professor Collin said.



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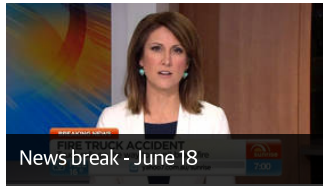


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