

WA is exploring the use of shark nets here, but is it because they work or is there another agenda? **Christopher Neff** reviews the NSW experience.

Along 51 beaches and 250km of NSW coastline, beach nets line the surf. Beach nets were approved in 1935, but only as a two-year experiment.

The reason the State financed netting for 1937-38 was because it was the 150th anniversary of NSW's founding. Politicians were worried there would be a shark attack during the celebration.

During World War II, nets were removed from beaches because of ship movements. For three years, between 1943 and 1946, there were no fatal shark attacks at these un-netted beaches.

At the end of the war, NSW premier William McKell declared beach nets were "quite valueless", noting that "since meshing ceased in January 1943, there had been no shark fatality on our beaches".

However, instead of abandoning shark nets, Mr McKell announced plans to use them in combination with experimental shark repellents because "if meshing alone were used, I fear it would prove to be of little value".

"Worse, it would possibly lull the public into a sense of false security, leading to diminished watchfulness and possibly to tragedy," he said.

Despite there having been no shark attacks and little threat of it in these locations, the nets were put back and the scheme expanded.

More recently, beach nets were re-endorsed in a Department of Primary Industries report in 2009. It provided a contemporary view of shark nets. The then

environment minister Ian Macdonald called the nets "highly successful". Yet of the 38 shark attacks recorded in the State from 1937 to 2008, 24 (63 per cent) took place at netted beaches.

The minister and department correctly pointed out that there had been only one fatality at a netted beach (1951) under this program.

But attributing low fatality rates to beach nets is questionable. Internationally, fatality rates from shark bites have declined dramatically for all shark control methods, and even for when no controls were being tried.

Irish trauma researcher David Caldicott published a study in 2001 showing the survival rate for

shark bites was 80 per cent, because of better on-scene treatment and antibiotics. The leading reason for fatalities was blood loss. In 1963 actress Marcia Hathaway was attacked by a shark in Sydney Harbour. The ambulance called to the scene broke down and she bled to death 20 minutes after the attack.

The NSW Government's shark

bite data suggests a number of possibilities. It could be the nets are vitally needed since there clearly have been sharks in those regions. But the 63 per cent failure rate raises fundamental questions about their effectiveness.

To be fair, beach nets aren't just installed to prevent sharks and

Undesirable consequence: A young humpback struggles in a shark net off Queensland's coast. Picture: AAP

Caught up in politics

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people interacting. Nets were originally used, in 1935, to cull populations so there would be fewer sharks and fewer shark alarms.

In the 2009 DPI report, it was argued that, although culling was indiscriminate, the goal was to kill bigger sharks to reduce the risk of a fatal attack. And killing sharks (and other marine species) was one thing nets did well.

Is there an alternative? At this point, I think it is important to recap the central elements.

First, shark nets were given only tentative approval in 1935 and were only funded in 1937 as a precaution ahead of NSW's anniversary.

Second, there were no fatal shark attacks during the three years the nets were taken out.

And third, nets have been deemed successful even though 63 per cent of shark attacks at beaches in NSW have been at netted beaches.

In all, I suggest that at key points in the history of shark nets the debate has proved itself to be a story about people and politics rather than shark behaviour.

So what do we do instead? It is not a simple matter. Beach nets are potential political dynamite. Indeed, the Twitter post writes itself: "16-yr-old killed by shark at previously netted beach #bloodonourhands".

Internationally, shark nets have been labelled a "key threatening process" for killing endangered species.

These days killing endangered species to boost public confidence or to show government action is



All out: Last week, a Mullaloo beach event was stopped after a shark sighting.



Marker: The Cottesloe pylon is the only remaining evidence of an unsuccessful attempt in 1936 to build a shark-proof net, a plan sparked by a fatal attack in 1925.

not workable. To restore an objective critique of this emotive issue we need a workable alternative.

It is time for Australia to catch up. If killing sharks is taken off the table, then other innovative safety options are possible. In Cape Town, Florida, New Zealand

and Hawaii, shark control methods have been replaced by beach safety tactics.

These tactics include greater use of signs and flags to educate the public about marine hazards and using tracking devices on sharks to determine seasonal movements. This has begun but

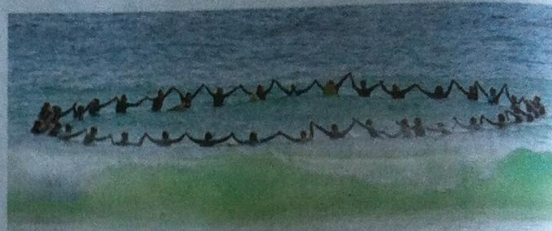
could be expanded. A fundamental question is whether shark safety should be based on decisions that governments make, with policies determining our personal level of risk in the water, or whether the public should be educated and informed about safety and make its own determinations.

This analysis is not intended to minimise the terrible consequences from shark attacks. Sharks do bite people and public safety measures should be taken.

It is not clear, however, if the status quo is working. The truth about shark nets is also about "truth in government". Government action and the public's role cannot be obscured by the dreaded nature of these events.

The time has come for a new public dialogue about public education and beach safety regarding sharks, not simply because beach nets harm the environment, or because there are questions about whether they work, but because these 70-year-old tactics mean Australia is being left behind.

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In memory: Surfers honour Bunker Bay shark victim Kyle Burden this year.

A false sense of security

■ Sally Cox

WA will lead the nation in beach safety and shark conservation but the use of shark nets should be avoided, a WA shark scientist has warned.

Ryan Kempster, a marine neuroecologist at the University of WA, welcomed this week's decision by the State Government to invest \$14 million over five years to fund non-lethal strategies to reduce the threat to swimmers from sharks.

"This will set a benchmark for other States and is a great outcome for public safety and shark conservation," he said.

Mr Kempster was the instigator of a petition against shark culls. The petition was supported by 120 marine scientists and attracted 19,000 signatures.

Fisheries Minister Norman Moore said this week that the Government's shark strategy would include an extension of the great white shark tagging program, studies to look at the effectiveness of shark repellents and the use of SMS and other social media alerts.

There would be heavier fines for those disposing of blood or offal at popular beaches. Although the Government does not currently support nets, a study into the effectiveness of shark nets would also be a key feature.

However, Mr Kempster warned shark nets gave people a false sense of security and there was no scientific evidence to suggest they improved public safety.

"Shark nets are indiscriminate and (can) catch any marine life including dolphins, turtles, whales, manta ray and dugong."

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