



[Last Word.]



Policy sharks bite

[By RYAN KEMPSTER]

■ Western Australian Premier Colin Barnett and Fisheries Minister Norman Moore recently announced their Government will allocate \$6.85 million for a “shark mitigation” strategy, in response to the recent wave of shark bite incidents in the state.

I applaud the government for allocating \$4 million to applied research and tagging programs. This is certainly the best way to understand the root cause of shark bite fatalities and learn how to deter future incidents.

They have also allocated \$500,000 to Surf Lifesaving WA to bolster beach safety and \$150,000 for additional community awareness programs. I believe that on-the-ground work with the local community, informing people of the potential risks involved with entering the ocean and how to avoid dangerous situations, is a key factor in improving public safety and reducing shark bite incidents.

All of the measures mentioned above are extremely positive in terms of both public safety and shark conservation.

However, the government has also allocated \$2 million for a new service allowing the Department of Fisheries to track, catch and, if necessary, destroy sharks in close proximity to beach-goers. This includes setting drum lines if a danger is posed.

The government is clearly under extreme pressure following a number of incidents over the past 12 months – pressure magnified by the local media – to consider removing white sharks in an attempt to make the ocean a safer place. This is even though Western Australians are overwhelmingly against shark culling.

According to Shark Alarm, a group that monitors shark activity in Australian waters, the state government’s decision may actually have unintended consequences: “People who love the ocean, and who respect that this species is endangered will now most likely refuse to report the sighting at all, in fear that

the shark will be killed by the government”.

During the latter half of the 20th century, shark culling was carried out in Hawaii in an attempt to make the waters safer. From 1959 to 1976, the state of Hawaii culled 4,668 sharks, including 554 tiger sharks. No significant decrease in the rate of shark bites was detected.

Yet here we are 40 years on, again proposing the use of this strategy. Pre-emptively killing sharks is simply an appeasement tactic, based on emotion rather than real science.

The WA Government is understandably in a difficult situation. Every shark bite incident brings the issue to the public’s attention thanks to the local media looking for a story that will sell. It is therefore no surprise that the WA Government has issued an order to kill sharks if they pose an imminent danger/threat, as they probably believe that this is what the WA people want.

WA has had legislation (Section 7[2] of the Fish Resource management Act 1994) in place for many years that enables the Department of Fisheries to kill sharks after a fatality, if they can properly identify the individual involved. To date, they have never acted on this legislation. Now they have the option of killing sharks before an incident. Time will tell if they will actually act upon this or whether this is really just a tactic to satisfy a section of the community and finally bring this issue to a close.

I previously ran a successful campaign against shark culling in WA which gathered the support of over 100 of the world’s leading shark experts and over 19,000 members of the public. I stand by this campaign and reiterate that investment in research, and involvement with the local community on how to avoid coming in contact with potentially dangerous sharks, are key to preventing future unwanted encounters. GN

RYAN KEMPSTER IS A MARINE NEUROECOLOGIST (SENSORY BIOLOGIST) AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA AND FOUNDER OF CONSERVATION GROUP SUPPORT OUR SHARKS.



