

Shark Tales of Albany

Imagine the look of horrified surprise on the face of Alex Lang one wintry afternoon in June 1925 when he cut open a seven foot (2.1m) shark that the Westerberg brothers had earlier caught in a net on the south side of Princess Royal Harbour. Amongst the contents of the shark's stomach was the remains of a human arm and hand! Mr Lang had merely planned to use the shark's innards to fertilise his garden and was certainly not expecting this turn of events.

The recent shark attack on Jason Cull off Middleton Beach in May this year led us to thinking about the history of human – shark contacts in Albany and it appears that Mr Lang's experience was evidence of one of two likely shark fatalities in Albany waters, but more of that later.

Sharks have undoubtedly been swimming off Albany for thousands of years and hopefully will continue to do so for thousands more. That the Noongar people, including those around Albany, were aware of sharks is demonstrated by their having various words for them such as maadjat, mundu and warnang. The early whalers, sealers and sailors would also undoubtedly have been aware of sharks and wary of them.

In March 1889, the Albany Mail recorded a Captain Jones catching a thirty foot (9.1m) shark in Princess Royal Harbour and some years later the Government Resident Rowley Loftie saw fit to write a letter to the paper warning others of his sighting of four or five sharks at the “picnic end” of Middleton Beach, at least one of which was a “monster”. Magistrate Loftie wrote that these sharks were “so close to shore...I feared to swim my dog”.

Magistrate Loftie's warning could have been seen as prophetic because before that year was out, Albany's recorded its first probable shark fatality. On 29 November 1896 Ernest Davis and Frank Bee were out fishing in a boat in Princess Royal Harbour when it capsized, throwing them into the water. They were not a great distance from shore and started swimming. Mr Bee made it ashore but lost sight of Mr Davis on the way. A subsequent search by police and others for the unlucky Mr Davis found the remnants of a man's shirt with part of a left arm inside it. The arm had what appeared to be shark tooth marks on it and was reportedly gnawed, rather than torn, off. Witnesses indicated that the shirt was identical to one that Mr Davis had been seen wearing earlier in the day of his disappearance and the fact that it still held an 18c gold collar stud was taken to demonstrate that it had not been willingly discarded. (One would think that the presence of the arm would have also supported that theory.) Another witness who had been fishing in the same vicinity that day reported having moved his boat closer to shore as a result of having seen a large shark. The result of a coronial inquiry was that Mr Davis had been taken by a shark.

During the nineteenth century, sea bathing was not a particularly popular pastime, but in the early years of the twentieth century, this started to change. Swimming baths were under construction on the harbour foreshore in 1911 and at this time thought was also

given to building a shark-proof fence at Middleton Beach. At a Town Council meeting in November 1911 a cost estimate of Forty Pounds was given by the Town Clerk to build such a fence. Cr Cuddihy moved for the work to be placed on the estimates for the following year but Cr Reddin, perhaps more aquatically inclined, moved that the work “be carried out at once”. Voting was tied but the Mayor’s casting vote supported Cr Reddin’s proposition for prompt action.

Town Clerk Ernest Paton followed Council’s direction with commendable alacrity, considering the intervention of Christmas and New Year, and by the end of January 1912 was advertising for tenders for a shark-proof fence at Middleton Beach. Tenders were to close by 9 February.

Keen followers of Albany Council activities and government processes in general, would not be surprised to learn, however, that a year later the Albany Advertiser reported that in Government Votes to Council the sum of One Hundred Pounds had been received by the Town Treasurer towards the fence. It was not reported whether this sum was towards construction or maintenance of the fence but it seems that even if the terms “cost blowout” and “construction delays” were not familiar in 1913, the concepts certainly were!

Further research would be needed to ascertain the complete history of the fence but just four years later at a Council meeting, Cr Bailey “drew attention to the dangerous state of the shark-proof fence at Middleton Beach”. A motion was passed to have the Town Foreman report on the matter but it is not known what the eventual outcome of this report was, or how much longer the fence remained in place.

Big sharks were certainly still around. Eighty year old Emmanuel King, reminiscing in 1963, remembered catching a twenty six foot (7.9m) bullnosed shark near the Frenchman’s Bay whaling station in 1915. The shark's jaw contained around 400 teeth and these were sold for 2/6 each, a reasonable sum of money in 1915 when Five Pounds would buy a reasonable pony and wages of 15/- a week were being offered for a young maid. The Albany Advertiser at that time sold for a Penny, making each tooth worth \$36 in 2008 terms.

And then we come to Mr Lang’s macabre experience in 1925. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this event was the casual reaction to it. If a human arm turned up in a shark in Princess Royal Harbour today, it would probably be front page news around the country, if not the world. Major efforts would take place to ascertain the original owner of the arm and to trace how it had found its way into the shark. In 1925, however, the discovery rated only a few lines on the second page of the Albany Advertiser, along with other minor tidbits of local news. The item casually goes on to say that the arm having no identifying features, local Police Sgt Anderson ordered that it be buried! That was it. Nothing more appears to have been said or done regarding this remarkable discovery.

Over the years of the twentieth century, Middleton Beach became more and more popular as a swimming destination and the sharks continued their lives a little further out in the

water with no other regrettable (from a human point of view) interactions for some time. Whaling was known to attract the attention of sharks keen for a free feed and large sharks were sometimes caught, often as Emmanuel King noted, for their teeth and jaws, rather than their eating value.

By the second half of the twentieth century, the number of people swimming at Middleton Beach again led to consideration of how to prevent any possible shark attacks. In December 1959 a nine foot (2.7m) shark was spotted just off Middleton Beach. The surf lifesavers had a portable hand siren but it was reported that this wasn't loud enough to reach people who were any distance from it. The Surf Club did have a louder electric siren but the observation tower had just been relocated and had no power point to plug this siren into. It was agreed that this oversight should be rectified immediately.

In 1961 the Albany Advertiser reported that there had been a record five shark alarms in one day on 5 March. The sharks sighted were varied, with one hammerhead being caught and another sighting being of a bronze whaler. Experienced observers noted that there were a large number of fish in the waters off Middleton Beach that day and this appeared to have attracted the sharks. November and December of that year also brought frequent shark sightings and early in 1962 a public meeting was held to commence an appeal to fund the purchase of an even louder shark siren. Shortly after the appeal commenced, a local fisherman caught a twelve foot (3.6m) white pointer not far off Middleton Beach. Charging admission to view this monster of the deep promptly, and fittingly, raised nearly half the Four Hundred Pounds gathered by the appeal. This was more than enough for the required alarm and there was even money left over for the Surf Club to spend on swimming costumes and lockers for members. As an additional precaution against attack, in 1964 public-spirited Albany identity John Bell commenced aerial shark patrols along Middleton Beach in conjunction with joy flights he offered to the public. He radioed any sightings made to Radio 6VA for broadcast. This was reportedly WA's first aerial shark patrol WA, outside of Perth.

Early in 1974, Glen Tunbridge, a local skindiver, had an unpleasantly close encounter with a four foot (1.2m) bronze whaler, when it took a taste of his leg while he was diving off Emu Point. Protected by his wet suit, Mr Tunbridge did not need any stitches but he reported that it felt like a "hammer blow" and necessitated a day off work. He dismissed the event as "a bit of a laugh" but did note that it was concerning in that children's swimming lessons took place in the near vicinity.

Mr Tunbridge should be relieved that his encounter was not with the gigantic 5m white pointer caught by Colin Ostle just over a year later, on 20 April 1975, from the fishing boat Pyramid. Weighing in at 1470kg this was technically a world record breaking size. Despite being 259kg heavier than the existing record holder, Mr Ostle's shark was not credited as breaking the record because he had merely lassoed it by the tail, rather than caught it on a line. The size of sharks being caught in Albany waters, perhaps along with recently released Jaws inspired mania, led to a proposal in late 1975 for Albany to hold an international shark fishing competition but nothing seems to have come of this.

So there we have a few of the Shark Tales of Albany and, despite Jason Cull's misfortune, it would seem the odds of being bitten are pretty low. On the day that Jason Cull was bitten, even when spotted from the air, a few hundred metres or less from the beach, nothing could be seen of the shark(s) from the beach itself, so they are probably always out there but we are just unaware of them. Luckily it seems as if their interest in humans may be less than ours in them, so happy swimming.

If you have any comments, corrections or additions to the tales above, particularly anything related to the 1925 story of the arm in the shark, the author would love to hear it.

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