

No Fear: Pacifica Surfer-Scientist has a healthy respect for sharks

By JOHN MAYBURY
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Nathan Ramstetter is a home-grown Pacifica surfer, scientist, and shark-lover. He has a bachelor's degree in geology and is about to get his master's in geology from San Jose State University, which he hopes to parlay into a career with the California Coastal Commission (he just passed the commission's certification exam).

When he had a day off recently from lifeguarding at Oceana Pool (now in his 14th year on the job), he headed down to Monterey Bay Aquarium to see the great white sharks, but that's only because it wasn't a good day for surfing.

Pacifica's beaches have lured and inspired Nathan since his student days at Ortega (K-8) and Terra Nova (9-12). As a kid, he started boogieboarding on his own at Linda Mar State Beach, learning as he went along, eventually graduating to long and short boards. He says the best moment he ever had on the water was seeing a dolphin riding the wave next to him.

Any downside? "Getting hit by my own board," Nathan says with a knowing laugh.

He owns six surfboards, long and short, and recommends that beginners learn on long boards, which are more forgiving, then move up to short boards. He also recommends local surf camps and surf shops (Norcal, Log Shop, K Star, and Sonlight). Nathan is partial to Sonlight, he says, because the owner is more likely to be in the store than is the case with the other three surf shops. But Nathan also

says he patronizes the Log Shop because he has been friends with owner Tait Cowan since the 5th grade.

Nathan's workout routine for beginning and experienced surfers includes endurance training such as swimming and bicycling to strengthen the knees; boogieboarding and bodysurfing for upper-body strength; and balance boards and stretching for flexibility.

Nathan is not afraid of sharks — more like in awe of them. He calls them "great animals, very efficient hunters whose genetic design has remained unchanged for a million years." He says sharks have not evolved because they have been so successful the way they are: "They are brutal. They know what their prey is. Luckily, you usually are not their prey. But if you should happen to be, you have a lot to worry about."

What is the right way to think about sharks when you're on the water? "Look at conditions and the environment. Check recorded messages at the surf shops," Nathan says. "Is it murky or choppy? If so, then the sharks can't see you. And that's dangerous. You're safe only when they can see you. At certain times of year, say during the seals' mating season, there are a lot of sharks around. Is there any dead sea life in the water or on the sand? The smell of blood or decay attracts sharks. They are scavengers. Stay out of their way."

Nathan advises against surfing, diving, or swimming around seals and sea lions, because that's what sharks hunt for food. "They will see you as the slowest and weakest swimmer, and they will pick you off," he says,

mentioning that a black-wetsuited human and the outline of a surfboard both can be visually confused with seals and sea lions, making you a target of opportunity for a shark. In fact, the only object in the water that is safe is the boogie board, because it is the wrong silhouette to a shark.

Free diving is the worst, Nathan says, laughing about his own abalone diving exploits in that high-risk environment. Free divers look just like seals as they swim up and down searching for the delectable shellfish. To a shark, free divers are free lunch.

Another warning sign to look for on the water is "abnormal behavior by seals or dolphins," Nathan says. "This means that sharks are nearby. Also, don't splash around in the water. This makes you look weak or wounded. And don't wear loose items that flap around in the water. They look like bits of torn flesh." And that, of course, triggers the shark's instinct to hunt and feed.

"They are always out there, not just when they bite someone," Nathan explains. "You never hear about sharks when nobody is getting bitten." He once saw a photograph taken from above a popular surfing spot, showing several sharks circling the surfers, although none of the surfers were aware of the predators and none were bitten.

"The risk of attack is actually very low," he adds. "One thing I learned in scuba diving is that almost no unprovoked shark attacks have ever been reported below six feet deep in the water. At that depth, they can see you. They know you're down there. Then you're okay." In fact, most shark attacks occur within the first six feet of

water, at or near the surface, particularly when a swimmer or diver is entering or exiting a boat or diving platform. And this is mainly due to confusion about the target and its food value.

Nathan says that when you study the record of shark bites on humans, most are inflicted by juvenile sharks inexperienced in the ways of stupid humans, or that are ravenously hungry because of their low rank in the shark world's pecking order. Pacifica's waters actually are safer than many others, Nathan points out, because there are plenty of seals around here, providing ample food supplies for sharks. (No fat-shark jokes, please.)

Generally, sharks are "smart enough to take a test bite or bump you to check your response in the water," Nathan explains, so the smart thing to do is stay still, then when it's safe to do so, get the hell out of Dodge. He notes that most attacks on surfers are nonfatal, because sharks pretty quickly learn that the creature inside the neoprene suit is not prey. On the other hand, free divers, whose up-and-down behavior in the water mimics that of natural prey (seals), suffer the worst fate in shark attacks.

Nathan has no desire to put himself in harm's way, as do some people who pay big bucks to swim with the great white sharks. Nathan says certain shark handlers know how to stay safe in such situations, even without a cage, but he adds, "Personally, I wouldn't want to take that chance."

"We are going into the sharks' environment," Nathan says. "We need to treat them with respect and be



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their friends."

His devotion to the overall health of the ocean and its creatures has led him to study efforts to harness tidal and wave action as a free energy resource, especially how this technology affects surfing conditions. He recommends a quarterly periodical called Surfer's Path, which recently

covered this topic (surferspat.com).

(Nathan welcomes your questions about sharks and surfing: Broccoli0@aol.com. That's broccoli zero, landlubber, but I bet you thought it should be spinach zero.)

Sighting and Bitings: <http://www.sharkresearchcommittee.com> or www.sharktracker.com