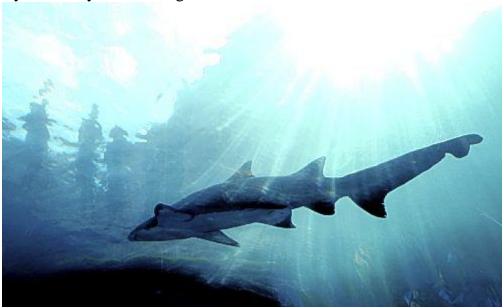


Swimming with sharks

'Sharks are a vital component to the environment ... They're predators, but they're keeping things in balance.'

Wednesday, August 15, 2012 By John Hayes, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Andrew Rush/Post-Gazette

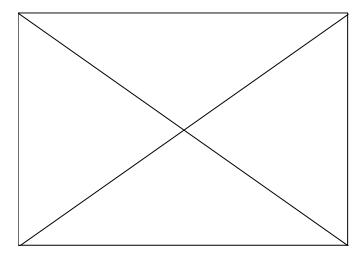
A shark swims overhead in the sand tiger shark exhibit at the Pittsburgh Zoo & PPG Aquarium.

Six feet of muscle and a mouthful of teeth swimming 2 feet beneath me and my water-clogged snorkel. Almost literally, it took my breath away.

Scientists at Pittsburgh Zoo & PPG Aquarium attempted to stress a point about conservation Tuesday when they invited reporters to swim with sharks as part of a promotion designed to teach people about keeping a respectful distance from wild animals. The irony wasn't lost on Dwayne Biggs, curator of aquatic life at PPG Aquarium, but he said it was a good opportunity to spread an important message.

"Truth is, sharks are not doing very well in the wild at all," he said. "We want to try to tell people what the sharks are going through and what we need to do to help them."





The Pittsburgh Zoo is linked to international efforts to conserve shark populations and educate the public about them. To that end, reporters shared a 276,000-gallon tank of synthetic saltwater with five sand tiger sharks, a threatened species that were captured when they were young off Ocean City, Md. The largest, a 300-pound female, glided slowly between me and a 40-foot transparent underwater tunnel clogged with zoo guests watching from below. Docile and more shy than curious, the big animals posed little threat as divers kept watch nearby.

About three times a week the sharks are fed mackerels, drum and added vitamins. PPG Aquarium exhibits several shark species including zebra, bamboo and blacktip reef sharks, as well as related rays. Mr. Biggs said the big sand tigers are the most popular fish among zoo guests. Education programs on site and at the zoo's website (www.pittsburghzoo.org) explain what's happening to sharks worldwide.

"Over 100 million sharks are harvested a year -- a lot of it is in Asia and Japan -- to make soup," Mr. Biggs said. "What people need to know is that sharks are a vital component to the environment, no different than a tiger or a lion. They're predators, but they're keeping things in balance."

Some American zoos permit guests paying up to \$175 to swim with aquarium sharks. Mr. Biggs said Pittsburgh Zoo has considered the promotion but has no such plans at this time.

Another type of commercial shark swimming, however, can provide conservation advantages or increase the human threat to sharks. Despite -- or maybe because of -- the continuing fear factor associated with sharks, a burgeoning ecotourism industry puts thousands of people very close to wild sharks. For fees that can reach thousands of dollars, some outfitters guide shark tourists into schools of potentially dangerous

animals. Some bait sharks while clients watch from a distance, but others allow risk-taking tourists to climb into shark tanks and hand-feed the hungry predators.

Mr. Biggs said intruding into any wild animal's habitat at close range is usually unsafe for people and the animal, and conditioning wildlife to associate food with people is never good. But, he said, the urgency to protect sharks through education gives some responsible ecotourism operations a pass.

"There's good shark tourism, and there also can be some negative shark tourism," he said. "It depends on what kind of message is given. Any time you get someone in the water and they make a connection and understand how beautiful these animals are -- that they're not out to get you and serve a purpose -- that's important."

Mahmood Shivji, a shark expert and professor at the Oceanographic Center at Nova Southeastern University in Florida, said a recent increase in global shark tourism can be bad for sharks when irresponsible operators permit hand feeding and condition wild sharks to return to specific locations for food. But done responsibly, he said, shark tourism can actually protect sharks.

"I know scientists who are of the opinion that you don't feed grizzly bears at Yellowstone and you don't feed sharks in the ocean," he said. "But there's a flip side to this. When I weigh the pros and cons of a well-run ecotourism operation changing people's attitudes and turning them to be much more sympathetic about sharks, I find that benefit is really large."

Mr. Biggs said while divers swim every day with the sharks at PPG Aquarium, a respectful distance is kept between humans and animals.

"This animal here, next to us right now," he said, pointing to a 300-pound sand tiger, "that's a wild animal. The bottom line is they're wild animals and you have to treat them this way."

John Hayes: 412-263-1991, jhayes@post-gazette.com.

First published on August 15, 2012 at 12:00 am

Read more: http://old.post-gazette.com/pg/12228/1254204-113.stm#ixzz23nwgTVv1