

THE AUSTRALIAN

Killing threat no safe bet

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The first shark caught under the state government scheme was killed on Australia Day. Picture: Perth 9 News Source: Supplied

IT'S a breezy, sunny morning on Australia Day as children frolic in the gentle rolling waves and squeaky white sands of Meelup Beach near Dunsborough, a favourite holiday spot for generations of West Australians.

Yet just 1km from this picture-postcard scene of tranquility, the dirty work of trying to keep beachgoers safe is being carried out with brutal force.

Just after 7am on Sunday, a commercial fisherman hired by the Barnett government pulled a 3m female tiger shark from the waters off Meelup Beach.

As the animal thrashed about in the water in apparent agony, it was shot four times in the head at close range with a .22 calibre rifle.

The shark, a threatened species, was then towed about 5km out to sea and dumped.

Several hours earlier, the unlucky animal had swallowed a large hook attached to a heavy



Premier Colin Barnett says his policy may not be popular but is necessary to save lives. Picture: Colin Murty Source: News Limited

chain, growing increasingly distressed as it was prevented from swimming until it was too weak to move.

It was the first shark to be snared under the government's contentious new catch-and-kill policy, which involves laying drum lines - or large baited hooks - along extensive sections of Western Australia's south coast in a bid to prevent fatal attacks.

All tiger sharks, bull sharks and great whites measuring more than 3m will be destroyed if caught on the drum lines, a policy enforced partly in commonwealth waters and endorsed last week by federal Environment Minister Greg Hunt.

This week the WA Department of Fisheries is expected to start laying drum lines off Perth's crowded beaches - a move that will please local surfing groups, which have lobbied the government for immediate action.

Premier Colin Barnett says he derives no joy or satisfaction from seeing sharks killed in this way, but suggests he has no alternative other than to act following seven fatal attacks off the state's beaches in the past three years.

Opponents of the program say it looks like policy on the run - and they may be right.

But the final straw for Barnett, according to government sources, was the horrific death in November of surfer Chris Boyd, 23, at Gracetown, 30km south of Meelup Beach.

With some opinion polls suggesting that most West Australians are opposed to any form of shark cull, Barnett - whose poll ratings have taken a big tumble in recent months - insists he is doing what's necessary to save lives rather than what's popular.

"That's why I get paid the big bucks," he told *The West Australian* at the weekend. "Someone has to bear the responsibility and I think that that falls to me. I know that's not going to make me popular at all, but that's not the reason I became Premier."

However, Ryan Kempster, a shark biologist at the University of WA, disputes Barnett's assertion that the government had no choice but to kill sharks.

He says Barnett has so far ignored a letter he and more than 100 other shark experts from across the world wrote to him late last year calling for a non-lethal solution to the problem.

Kempster cites a recent program in Brazil, which is backed by published academic research, that involves the capture of large sharks using drum lines. The sharks are brought on board and placed in a tank filled with running seawater, before being measured, sexed, tagged and released about 8km from shore, away from popular beaches.

The drum lines in Brazil are designed so that the sharks will stay alive, affording the animals plenty of room to swim in large circles, thereby minimising stress.

Kempster says a similar tagging program should be adopted in WA as it would boost scientific understanding of shark movements and behaviour, ultimately increasing the safety of swimmers and surfers. Moreover, it would provide an effective response to community concerns without the need to kill a threatened species.

A spokeswoman for Barnett yesterday dismissed the Brazil study.

"In trying to keep popular beaches safe, the patrolling vessels need to patrol the drum lines from 6am to 6pm," she said. "Long trips seaward outside of state waters would keep the vessels from effective patrolling. Further, tagging and releasing a shark further out in federal waters provides no guarantee

that the shark will not return to the area and therefore compromise public safety.

"Should such a policy be implemented and a released shark returns and is responsible for an attack or fatality, the repercussions would be significant."

Kempster also refers to a program of shark culling carried out in Hawaii between 1959 and 1976, when more than 4500 sharks were killed without any significant decrease in the number of attacks recorded.

"Pre-emptively killing sharks is a reaction based on emotion rather than scientific data," he says.

In making the case for killing sharks, Barnett has pointed to Queensland's record of using shark nets and drum lines over the past 50 years. The drum lines in Queensland account for about 500 sharks a year. Consequently, the only death from a shark attack in recent years has been on Stradbroke Island, off Brisbane, in 2006, when 21-year-old Sarah Whiley was taken by a bull shark at Amity Point.

Environmentalists do not seem very comfortable talking about the apparent success of the Queensland cull. Instead, they have long complained that the state's shark control program has come at an enormous cost to other marine life, with hundreds of turtles hooked in the drum lines.

Over the border in northern NSW, a state which uses shark nets but no drum lines, there have been more shark attacks, the most recent being in November last year when Zac Young, 19, was taken by a shark at Campbells Beach near Coffs Harbour.

Barnett says WA decided against shark nets because of the risk of catching other marine life, and it is using significantly larger hooks than those in Queensland, to avoid catching smaller fish.

Jeff Hansen, the managing director of Sea Shepherd Australia, says he "felt sick" yesterday at seeing photographs of the "beautiful" tiger shark being dragged from the ocean and shot in the head.

"The way we treat this animal is to indiscriminately kill her on Australia Day," he says. "It makes me ashamed to be Australian."

Hansen says there is a risk that the baited drum lines off WA's beaches will simply draw more sharks closer to swimmers because the carcasses could attract larger sharks.

He suggests that the higher rate of shark sightings and attacks in WA in recent years could be attributable to the higher number of craypots in the water.

Regardless, Hansen says the threat posed by sharks to swimmers and surfers has been vastly exaggerated.

"Think of the hundreds of thousands of people in the ocean across Australia on the weekend," he says. "How many fatalities were there? If they wanted to eat us, they would do it every single day.

"Eight people died last year in the United States from being struck by lightning while playing golf. So it's more dangerous to play golf than it is to swim in the ocean."

Even for those who venture into the ocean, shark attacks are not a significant killer. In fact, rip currents claim an average of 21 lives each year in Australian waters compared with just one death caused by sharks, according to a study by the University of NSW. Yet rips do not get anywhere near as much attention as shark attacks.

Hansen says the killing of sharks - whose numbers are declining globally - poses a threat to the fragile ocean ecosystem and he is stunned that West Australian surfers have led the charge in calling for sharks to be killed.

The philosophy of surfing, he says, has traditionally been linked to a deep respect for the ocean.

"We can survive without surfing but we can't survive without sharks in our ocean," he says.

"It is very disappointing, because surfers are meant to be known as the caretakers of the ocean. They understand the marine environment, they understand the importance of biodiversity.

"The surfers who are calling for this are not real surfers."

Hansen also asks how Australia will be able to continue condemning Japan for killing whales and dolphins while it sanctions the culling of sharks in at least two states.

UWA's Kempster questions the competence of the commercial fisherman who identified the shark caught on Sunday as a bull shark. Photographs of the shark published yesterday confirmed he had made a glaring mistake.

"Without question it is a tiger shark," Kempster says. "Anyone with even the most basic knowledge of sharks would know that is a tiger shark. So you have to question how much this person knows about sharks. They've been asked to go out there and kill these animals, yet they can't even make the most basic identification."

A spokesman for Barnett said yesterday the government did not plan to release the identity of species of shark caught under the new policy, although fisheries officers may provide more detail at a later date.

In the meantime, Kempster says the government should focus more on understanding what causes sharks to bite people and what factors are responsible for them venturing closer to shore.

It should also put more emphasis on educating people about the risks, including the times of day and conditions under which attacks are more likely to occur.

He says warning signs at beaches known to be frequented by "dangerous" sharks would also help - a strategy often used in the US and other places where large sharks are common.

Additional reporting: Andrew Fraser