

# Shark Attacks in Indian Seas

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Many loss of lives at sea are often attributed to shark attacks. Though some species of sharks are known as killers, quite a few are small and rarely cause serious injuries. Three species of sharks which grow to larger sizes from 15 to 50 feet are considered harmless to man. They are the Whale shark (*Rhynodon typus*), the Basking shark (*Halsydrus sp.*) and the thresher shark (*Alopias vulpinus*). The Whale shark is the biggest living fish and grows to a length of more than 40 feet. This shark feeds on small organisms of the plankton by filtering the water through the gill rakers. However irrefutable evidence such as shark's teeth in wounds or finding of missing portions of the victim's body in the stomach justifies the lurking fear of these creatures in the minds of those associated with the sea, viz. bathers on the beaches, under-water spear fishermen and shipwreck and other sea survivors.

In India there have been reports of loss of human lives owing to shark attack. A shark caught off Versova, Bombay showed human skeletal remains when its stomach was cut open in the market. Species identity was not established because of the quick disposal of the shark before a proper investigation was carried out. It is important that correct identification is

made so that future preventive measures can be adopted. This is also necessary for conservation of the species of sharks which are not harmful to man. The following are the important species of sharks known to attack human beings and cause serious injuries or even death.

## CHARCHARODAN CHARCHARIAS:

This is known as the "White shark" and is the most dangerous of all the species. It has been known to follow ships for long distances and are the dread of sailors. They attack on least provocation. Though this species may not be represented in our waters there are members belonging to the Genus *Charcharias* which are capable of growing to 20 feet or more and must be approached with caution. *Charcharias melanoptera* attains 10 feet or more in length. Another known attacker is the Whaler shark (*Carcharinus macrurus*), especially in Australian waters.

## GALEOCERDO CUVIER

Also known as the 'Tiger' shark, attains 15 feet in length. Though a voracious scavenger is known to attack man, entering shallow waters. The peculiar structure of the tooth of this shark makes the identification easy in case any tooth mark is left on the body of the victim.

## PRIONACE GLAUCA

Is another aggressive shark known to attack man in Australian waters. It is also known as the 'Blue shark' on account of the bluish colour of its back. The extension of this species to Indian ocean is to be investigated.

## CHARCHARINUS GANGETICUS

This Indian sea shark is very aggressive and has been known to attack bathers of the Ganges. Very rarely the shark is known to have carried away its victims which is credited as owing to the close proximity of other bathers and their attempt to rescue the attacked victim. Some scientists are of opinion that the shark (*C. gangeticus*) may have acquired the habit of eating the flesh of corpses thrown into the Ganges after partial burning. The sharks acquiring taste for human flesh turn into man eaters.

There has not been many cases of shark attacks in Indian waters as have been recorded from Australia or the United States. The reason may be that the bathing resorts are not as popular in India as in those countries

which attract huge crowds. However in India with the development of tourism the bathing resorts are likely to attract more bathers. It need not be emphasised that there should be also security measures taken to avoid possible shark attacks on unwary bathers. In other countries measures such as lookout towers, meshing of the beaches etc. have been provided. Application of shark repellent chemicals on the body has been tried. The meshing of the beach is reported as most effective. The sharks force their way through the mesh and do not retrace and thus get caught. The tidal influences and the corrosion of the metal owing to its contact with sea water make frequent replacements of the fences inevitable and expensive. But such a measure results in saving valuable human lives.

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