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Survivors of Attacks Sink Teeth Into Fight to Save Sharks

By David A. Fahrenthold

Chuck Anderson is in Washington today to save the thing that bit off his arm.

It happened in June 2000, when he was swimming in the Gulf of Mexico off Alabama. A seven-foot bull shark came up from underneath, knocking him out of the water. It snapped off four of Anderson's fingers, chomped at his belly, then ripped away his right arm below the elbow.

The attack almost killed Anderson, 54. It also turned him into an advocate for one of the most fearsome fish in the sea.

"They're vicious, and they're mean," Anderson said. "But, you know, I don't have any right to be angry at the shark."

Anderson is in town for what could be the largest gathering of American shark-attack survivors to date -- and certainly one of the oddest lobbying blitzes ever on Capitol Hill. At least nine survivors plan to press the Senate to put new restrictions on fishing for sharks, some species of which are in deep decline. Thirty-two percent of the sharks and rays that live in the open ocean were classified as "threatened" this year by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature. Scientists fear that ocean ecosystems could be knocked out of whack by the loss of their "apex" predators.

The nine shark survivors offer a wildly counterintuitive story. For them, the terrifying seconds they spent as prey have created a forgiving, even admiring, bond with the ocean's great hunters.

The tiny group was organized by a survivor who works for the nonprofit Pew Environment Group. She began

calling others like her to see whether they might offer their unique perspective and lobby for protections. Some balked but several signed on, and Pew agreed to fund their outreach.

"We'll finally be heard," said Al Brenneka, 52, who lost his right arm to a seven-foot lemon shark in 1976. "Who

At the same time, sharks have been devastated by our desire to eat them -- in soup. The trade in fins for shark-fin soup, a delicacy in Asia, has been blamed for heavy fishing of many species. Others are slaughtered for the rest of their meat or killed accidentally by fishermen setting out nets or hooks for tuna and



should speak up for the sharks, better than the people that the sharks have spoken to themselves?"

Shark bites are rare in the United States: Since 2000, there have been an average of 43 per year and a handful of fatalities. At last count, the Florida-based International Shark Attack File calculated the odds of an attack as 1 in every 11.5 million beach visits.

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Because of all this, it is often said that sharks have more to fear from us than we from sharks.

That's true only most of the time.

"I just figured, I'm done," said Mike deGruy, 57, a marine biologist who was bitten by a grey reef shark while diving in the Pacific Ocean atoll of Enewetak in 1978. Spewing blood,

deGruy paddled to his boat through shark-filled waters for 25 minutes, speculating calmly about where the next one would hit him. "If I thought I might have made it, then I would have panicked."

DeGruy reached the boat and, eventually, a hospital in Hawaii.

"I still, to this day, do not understand why I was not eaten," said deGruy, who lost some function in one hand. "I must taste like crap."

Other survivors tell stories with similar elements: a sudden, stunningly muscular attack, lots of blood and little pain, and a mind cleared by adrenaline or fatalism.

"I remember thinking, 'Wow, this is supposed to hurt.' But there was no pain whatsoever," said Anderson, a former high-school football coach who was training for a triathlon when the shark hit him "like a fullback." It was on its fourth pass that the shark bit down on Anderson's right arm, he heard a pop, which was the shark taking his arm, and he was free.

For Anderson -- a naturally upbeat person who has returned to triathlons with a customized paddle on his elbow -- forgiveness came easy. He says he knew the risks of swimming in the sharks' habitat. "If we want to go out and swim in a safer environment, we can go to the YMCA."

But for others, hatred and fear came first.

Brenneka, whose attack made him go from a righty to a lefty, took his anger out on the animals directly. He would go deep-sea fishing and use a "powerhead" -- a bullet fired from a long tube -- to kill the sharks he hooked. He saved the jaws and ate the meat.

But then, Brenneka said, he went diving to see sharks, did research on them and concluded that the one that attacked him was not at fault. The

journey took years, he said, and was slowed down by the anti-shark mania that followed the release of "Jaws" in 1975.

"They're only doing what comes natural," Brenneka said. In 1988, he founded a group called Shark Attack Survivors. Many victims seek meaning in their attack by trying to understand sharks better, and come to respect them. "It is just something that you have to face, is 'It was my responsibility,' " he said.

Debbie Salamone was walking in waist-deep water at Canaveral National Seashore when a shark seized her heel, severing the Achilles tendon. She had been a committed environmentalist before the attack, but after, "if they proposed to pave over half the ocean for a strip mall and a parking lot, I would have been fine with it," she said.

Salamone has not gone so far as to take responsibility for the bite. But she says she came to see the attack as a deep, gory test of her resolve to help the environment. Including -- maybe especially -- the parts of it that bite.

She left a job in newspapers, and now works full time at the nonprofit Pew Environment Group. Sitting in a Caribou Coffee in downtown Washington this spring, she had an idea: Maybe other survivors would want to fight for sharks, too.

Two survivors whom she called said they were still too angry, she said.

The rest said yes. This visit suddenly became the biggest event for survivors that anyone could remember.

"We're seriously scarred . . . and some of us are missing limbs, and we have every right to hate sharks," Salamone said, sketching out the group's spiel for senators today. "I think the message is: If we can see the value in saving sharks, everyone should."

They are here to lobby for a Senate bill that would outlaw shark "finning" -- a practice in which fishermen slice off a shark's fin and toss the rest of its carcass overboard -- in U.S. waters.

The bill has already passed the House and has the support of federal fisheries managers, who say it would make existing shark protections easier to enforce. It will not save the world's shark populations; scientists say finning is largely done by overseas fishing crews. In the United States, it is already outlawed in the Atlantic Ocean and the Gulf, and is largely curtailed in the Pacific.

Last night, the group met at the Pew group's headquarters in downtown Washington to tell shark-survivor jokes (Anderson said his only revenge was the Timex watch the shark swallowed -- which went off at 5:15 every morning) and talk about the reactions to their scars.

DeGruy said his experience gave him an appreciation of what it is like to be a shark, seriously injured and left helpless in the water.

"We've been finned," he said of his injuries. "It's not a good thing."