

PRESS RELEASE - FOR IMMEDIATE DISTRIBUTION - DECEMBER 28, 2001

Florida divers, tourists applaud end of shark-feeding era

Deerfield Beach, Florida. In just a few days the feeding of sharks by divers will become illegal in Florida's ocean waters, a change receiving warm welcome by divers and tourists alike.

"At last, things will slowly start to return to normal on the reef" said Abe Hitt, a veteran Florida undersea explorer. "In the least 15 years I've seen Florida's popular dive sites change from 'classic' to 'circus' - mainly because of fish feeding".

Mandy Brown, a non-diver and Ohio resident visiting Orlando this week, also praised the new law. "We come to Florida in summer mainly because of the beach", she explained. "After all the shark stories last year, we were planning to take the kids to Hawaii next time instead. But this makes me feel better about coming back here".

The new rule, which prohibits shark (and other marine life) feeding by divers goes into effect on January 1, 2002. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FFWCC) unanimously approved the measure on November 1, after a contentious two-year battle between environmentalists and the dive industry.

In the end, the FFWCC found that the impacts of feeding sharks and other fishes by divers were unacceptable from a conservation standpoint, because it changed the animals' behavior. Commissioner Julie Morris summarized the general feeling of the Commission, stating, "this is not about whether feeding marine life creates human health and safety issues. It's very clear that it alters marine life behavior, and I believe that it's damaging to Florida's marine life."

The dive industry has filed a legal challenge to the new rule, but thus far without success. FFWCC general counsel Jim Antista is confident that the new rule will survive any challenge mounted by the dive industry, and will take effect as scheduled on Jan. 1.

Bob Dimond, President of the Marine Safety Group (a Florida non-profit that led the fight to ban shark feeding) was more direct; "You'd think they (dive industry) would understand by now that shark feeders are no longer welcome in Florida, freeze up their chum balls, and just slip out quietly through the back door. I don't think Yemen has laws against shark feeding - yet!"

Fish feeding is already completely prohibited in scattered areas of the world (for example, along the Egyptian coast of the Red Sea), as well as in all U.S. National Parks and Wildlife Refuges.

Other jurisdictions are considering similar restrictions in reaction to the degradation of marine habitats and increasing frequency of diver injuries caused by overly aggressive "fed" fishes. Hawaii recently closed off additional stretches of its coast to fish feeding, and South Africa is in the process of deciding the fate of shark feeding by divers.

The U.S. National Marine Sanctuary Program (NOAA), which to date has only restricted fish feeding in a tiny percentage of the waters under its jurisdiction, is coming under increasing pressure from environmentalists to bring its regulations in line with those of the U.S. and Canadian National Park Services.

"Why should our nation's marine life be given less respect - less protection - than land animals?" complained one environmentalist recently. "It doesn't make any sense".

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