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Recent fish attacks on divers may be legacy of fish feeding tours

Two seemingly unrelated fish attacks on divers this last week - one in Australia and one in Hawaii - may be the result of fish-feeding dive tours, according to a Florida environmental group.

On New Year's Eve, a 2m-long Queensland grouper, estimated to be up to 80 years old, attacked a Swedish tourist near the historic wreck of the steamship Yongala, 100km southeast of Townsville. The same fish later menaced another diver, lunging at the man and breaking his mask.

Last weekend, a six-foot tiger shark bit a small chunk out of a San Jose native who was snorkeling about 100 yards off a Hawaii beach.

Spokesmen for The Marine Safety Group, Inc. (MSG) believes the attacks may be linked to dive tour operations that often feed such predators to amuse clients. The Florida non-profit environmental organization successfully petitioned the State of Florida to prohibit the feeding of marine life by divers last year.

"The sort of behavior described in these two attacks is what we were seeing in Florida at dive sites where fish feeding took place, and exactly why we went to the State to stop such irresponsible behavior", stated Bob Dimond, President of MSG. "We were tired of being approached and harassed by big predators looking for a handout at every reef and wreck off our coast". The Florida ban went into effect on January 1, 2002.

Dr. William Alevizon, marine fish expert and Scientific Advisor to MSG, agreed that the attacks were unusual. "What seems strange here is that humans are rarely attacked by these species under such conditions. People are not on the natural menus of these predators, and there was no blood or food scraps in the water - no apparent stimulus present to trigger such attacks."

According to reports, in both cases the water was clear and no divers in the area were spearfishing.

Alevizon, a veteran of thirty years of diving all over the world, admitted that he was not aware of any direct evidence linking these particular attacks to prior fish feeding dives. Nonetheless, he said that the circumstances were suggestive of such a link, particularly in the case of the Australian attack. "The only places I have ever seen large predators like these fearlessly and aggressively approach divers", he said, "were places where fishes have been fed by divers in the past."

According to the Marine Safety Group's records, many attacks on divers have been documented at popular dive sites where fish feeding was common.

Although the victims of both attacks were treated and released, authorities remain concerned. The grouper's behavior will be monitored over the next two weeks.

But, Australian officials said, if the fish showed any more anti-social behavior, "there could be a number of courses of action. These can be very dangerous fish, they are huge and they are high level predators."

The park authority is considering relocation of the grouper. However, one conservationist suggested that relocation of any divers involved in feeding activities - preferably to central Australia - would be a more appropriate and effective solution.

Hawaii beaches near that attack site were reopened after being closed for about 24 hours because of the attack.

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