

A Collegian Ecological Feature...

Poor image of sharks leading to extinction, damaged ecosystem

by Anthony Hahn

A beautiful blonde teenager decides to leave a beach party and go down to the water. She rids herself of all her clothing and runs naked into the ocean for a swim in the moonlight. The first hint of terror is represented in the music, which begins to pound faster and harder like a frightened heart. The beast strikes, and the teenager reaches down for a leg that no longer exists. A second strike, then the jerk -- and the scream.

A gruesome image, isn't it? The first scene from *Jaws* is remembered by all who have seen the movie or read the novel, which has sold almost ten million copies around the world. This opening scene still shapes the popular image of sharks as savage eating machines that constantly prowl oceans, never sleeping, eager to bite into human flesh. Unfortunately, the image that haunts people's minds is on the opposite end of the spectrum from what sharks are like and how they survive. This image has led to the unnecessary slaughtering of sharks and their possible extinction. The hunting of sharks must stop, not only because of the fact that they are going extinct, but also because of the gruesome, inhuman way in which they are slaughtered.

The image that shark attacks on humans are frequent is false. In the United States, about three people are killed by sharks each year. Statistics show that sharks rarely attack humans. They state that the odds of being killed by a tornado are 1 in 450,000; lightning - 1 in 1.9 million; a bee sting - 1 in 5.5 million; and finally, the odds of being killed by a shark attack - 1 in 300 million! Obviously,

sharks are not nearly as threatening as people believe. Even the chances of being attacked by a shark are extremely low at 1 in 100 million. So much for the misconception that sharks are waiting to eat us.

Even the Great White is not the hideous predator that it is believed to be. The Great White does not search for humans. Its attacks on surface occur by accident, since the shark mistakes the smooth surfboards for seals. Once it takes a bite, the Great White will spit it out and swim away. Jacques Cousteau's experience tells of his encounter with a Great White: "Then the shark saw us. His reaction was the least conceivable one. In pure fright, the monster voided a cloud of excrement and departed at an incredible speed."

The fact is, man is now slaughtering sharks at a rate of 100 million a year. They are killed for sport, hunted for the grill in American restaurants, and drown in drift nets that are primarily set for tuna and squid. Every year, over seven million pounds of shark fins are sold to merchants in Hong Kong, where shark fin soup is sold for fifty dollars a bowl.

Basically, the fisherman's greed for money continues the mass slaughter.

The killing has now reached such alarming numbers that when scientists discuss sharks, the terms "marked decline" or "possibility of extinction" are used for many species. Makos and threshers, hunted for their meat, have depleted greatly. Lemon sharks, hunted only to be used as crab bait, and hammerheads, which have been annihilated only for their fins, are extremely rare in areas where they used to flourish.

How is it possible that our nation, which is concerned over pollution and the rain forests, along with other international problems, can turn their heads away from one of the greatest problems of all: the extinction of one of the most fascinating and important creatures on the planet?

Although the National Marine Fisheries Service is currently developing quotas on thirty-nine species, many believe it is already too late. Frank Mundus, a renowned shark hunter, believes that we are already twenty years too late. He states, "The sharks have already been over-fished. Sharks will never be as abundant as they