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Researchers pushing for shark protection laws

By CHESTER ROBARDS Guardian Staff Reporter chester@nasguard.com on 3/3/2011



Marine wildlife artist and conservationist Dr Guy Harvey holds up a poster he created aimed at the local shark protection campaign.

There could soon be a shark called C.V. Bethel tagged with a satellite tracking device by the Guy Harvey Research Institute swimming around the waters of The Bahamas or Bermuda.

The institute is lobbying for the protection of sharks around the world and especially in Bahamian waters where they are abundant.

The researchers recently spoke to 500 students from C.V. Bethel High School about sharks. The institute has pledged that the next shark it tags will be named C.V. Bethel in honor of the students.

"We're going to have the kids follow that animal's progress over the next year or two years, or however long the tag lasts, and generate more and more involvement using the benefit of the social media to help people get interested in the daily lives of these animals and to get them concerned about the survival of not only the individual they are following, that they have sponsored, but sharks in general," said scientist and marine wildlife artist Dr. Guy Harvey yesterday at the Bahamas National Trust.

He emphasized that it is important to teach school-aged children the importance of sharks to the environment.

Matt Rand, director of global shark conservation at the PEW Institute, said the marine ecosystem cannot survive without educating the public, especially the young about it.

"If we don't act now as responsible stewards for this environment, when they (school-aged kids) are our age and have careers, they will be facing a marine ecosystem that is in...further decline than it currently is," Rand said.

He added that there is a danger of shark overfishing, as 73 to 100 million are killed annually.?

There is significant demand for shark fins in China. The fins are used to make shark fin soup which is sold for as much as \$100 per bowl.

"Thirty percent of all shark species are threatened with extinction," said Rand.

Dr. Harvey said he would like to see the Government of The Bahamas place strict rules on the capture of sharks.

"There are only two or three remaining areas of the world that have any kind of meaningful abundance or scientific abundance of sharks," he said.

"Australia and New Zealand have fiercely protected their sharks, as (has) The Bahamas, and that action two decades ago by The Bahamas has already proven that this kind of forward-thinking can be very beneficial in terms of how you use and abuse your marine resources."

The Bahamas has no shark protection laws. However, there are protected marine parks across the country, preventing commercial fishing in those areas.

Dr. Mahmood Sivji, director of the Guy Harvey Research Institute, said The Bahamas could lead a campaign to protect sharks regionally from overfishing and indiscriminate capture.

He said there has been a 30 to 90 percent decline in shark populations in some jurisdictions around the world.

One of the reason for this, he added, is that sharks reproduce like mammals. They have only a few offspring at a time and those offspring take a long time to mature to adulthood.

Dr. Sivji added that the shark population in The Bahamas is healthier than anywhere he has seen in the world.

The researchers explained that sharks migrate from Bermuda to The Bahamas and into the mid-Atlantic Ocean. They argued that The Bahamas should fight for their protection across the region.