

Reading Explorer 2, Unit 6: Swimming with Sharks

Narrator:

Many people like to go diving when they are on vacation. This family is getting ready to dive off the coast of Florida. But this is no ordinary dive.

It may be difficult to comprehend, but there are some people who will pay a lot of money for the opportunity to dive ... with sharks.

Shark tourism is big business in some places and that's raising questions about how close people should get to them.

Kathy Sonnemann:

"I actually had a chance to lay down on the bottom and the sharks were right in front of me. And I could see their mouths and their eyes and they actually brushed up against me. And it was just really cool."

Narrator:

Several times a week, diving instructor Jeff Torode takes customers to swim and even play with these harmless nurse sharks.

But he no longer feeds the sharks as he once did.

In January 2002, Florida became the first U.S. state to ban the feeding of marine wildlife. That followed a summer of shark attacks which caused a lot of negative publicity.

The horror of shark attacks makes many people react against them. Some tourists, though, believe they should be able to get close to sharks, including dangerous varieties.

Divers in the waters of the Florida Keys, for example, often interact with bull, reef, and lemon sharks -- all of which have occasionally attacked people.

But despite such attacks, it would be inaccurate to say that sharks kill a lot of people.

In fact, dogs bite more people than sharks do -- and you have a greater chance of getting killed by lightning, bees, or snakes, than by a shark. In one recent year, there were just sixty shark attacks against humans, and just three deaths worldwide.

Still, some people think that it's foolish to feed sharks and bring them close to busy beaches.

Bob Dimond has been a diver for 30 years. He's still diving today -- although he's worried that sharks may be losing their fear of humans.

Bob Dimond:

"Feeding sharks. The reason —or the purpose— that people feed sharks is to attract them to human beings. That's why they do it. You may not be a shark's prey, but when sharks learn to associate humans with food they approach you, investigating to see if you have food."

Narrator:

For Dimond, that's reason enough for banning the feeding of sharks. Bob has created the Marine Safety Group. Their goal is to ban all shark feeding.

Bob Dimond:

"If you feed a wild animal you are greatly increasing the chance that that animal will attack humans. That is why it is banned—in every national park in the United States and Canada."

Narrator:

Shark feeding has never been directly associated with an attack on a human. When a shark does strike it is usually "hit and run." It bites and then quickly releases the person and disappears. Researchers hypothesize that these sharks may have confused a human with a seal or another animal that they would normally kill.

For divers such as this 14 year old girl, the opportunity to go diving with sharks is a chance to understand them better. Meeting them up close, she says, has made them a little less terrifying.

Trista Sonnemann:

"I thought they'd be more scary but they're not. They're a lot calmer than I thought they would be. I thought it was pretty cool -- it was really cool. A once-in-a-lifetime experience."