



MARK CARWARDINE

WILD THOUGHTS

The KwaZulu-Natal Sharks Board is caught in a timewarp. It still seems to be under the archaic impression that all sharks are dangerous and the world would be a better place without them. It maintains shark nets along 23km of the eastern coast of South Africa (supposedly to protect bathers) and these have been killing more than 1,000 sharks every year. Now local conservation groups are campaigning to have them removed.

There are three problems with shark nets: they don't work, they're not needed and they are highly destructive. There is a popular misconception that the nets provide a harmless physical barrier, like a giant underwater mosquito net. But there are so many gaps that sharks can, and do, swim right up to the 'protected' beaches. In actual fact, the nets are designed specifically to reduce the number of sharks in the vicinity – by killing them.

The irony is that shark nets aren't even necessary. I have a friend in Cape Town who runs great white shark trips every morning and then surfs half a mile away every afternoon. He knows that the risk of being harmed by a shark is minuscule. The Sharks Board should know that, too.

Another problem is that the nets are set mainly for great whites (outrageous in itself because they are supposed to be protected), tiger sharks and bull sharks. But these account for a tiny fraction of all the sharks, dolphins, turtles and other wildlife drowned in them 'by mistake'.

Admittedly, 1,000 sharks is a drop in the ocean compared to the 100 to 150 million sharks killed every year, mainly for their fins. But the very existence of shark nets to make tourists feel safe perpetuates the myth that swimming from an unprotected beach could result in an attack.

Ironically, the shark-net campaign comes in the same month the IUCN's Shark Specialist Group reports that a third of all open-ocean shark species are threatened with extinction. No wonder. If the KwaZulu-Natal Sharks Board isn't shark tolerant, how can we expect anyone else to be?

Mark will be writing an exclusive feature about making his new series, *Last Chance to See*, in September's *BBC Wildlife*.



Shark nets: they kill tiger sharks, but don't protect bathers.

The existence of shark nets perpetuates the myth that swimming from an unprotected beach is likely to result in an attack.