

MY WAY OF THINKING

MARK CARWARDINE

The conservationist discusses a recent video that shows a shark being shot at, and invites your thoughts on the subject.

I've just seen a truly shocking video – 'US coast guard crew have near-miss with shark in Pacific Ocean'. Nearly 40 crew members of the US Coast Guard Cutter *Kimball* are swimming around their boat, in the Pacific Ocean, when their party is crashed by a 2m shark (the footage is too bad to identify the species). Complete pandemonium ensues and, as everyone scrambles to get out of the water, a petty officer on board shoots at the shark several times. Thankfully, his aim is eye-wateringly dreadful – especially given the close range – and the shark swims away unharmed.

This is the US Coast Guard, for heaven's sake. They are supposed to be highly trained, courageous and (you'd have thought) at least moderately well informed about the sea and its inhabitants. Yet I couldn't find a single news report that questioned such madness. The headline should have read 'Innocent shark has near-miss with gun-toting American'.

Meanwhile, a few days later, drone footage of a curious great white in South Africa was posted online. This shark was at least twice the size of the 'deadly' shark encountered by the US Coast Guard and was investigating surfers sitting on their boards, waiting for a set. But this time there was no panic. Such close encounters are a daily occurrence in South Africa and all the surfers knew that the likelihood of being attacked was ridiculously small.

I've spent many hundreds of hours diving and snorkelling with all sorts of sharks over the years – including bull, tiger and great white – and have survived unscathed. I'd expect nothing less.

The truth is that our fear of sharks is out of all proportion. At least some of the blame must rest with the book *Jaws*, published in 1974, and with the high-profile movies that followed. They literally scared audiences out of the water and are largely responsible for the anti-shark hysteria that has gripped the western world ever since. But even today, the fear is stoked by the demand for shocking and titillating – and poorly researched – stories in the popular press.

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Worldwide, on average, there are 80 unprovoked shark attacks every year, resulting in about five deaths (most 'attacks' result in relatively minor injuries). The numbers are minuscule considering the millions of people swimming, snorkelling, diving and surfing in the sea every day: if sharks were deliberately out to get us, there would be many, many more attacks.

You are nearly twice as likely to be killed by a coconut falling on your head (150 people per year) than bitten, bumped, nipped or chewed by a shark, and several times more likely to win the EuroMillions jackpot (roughly two or three dozen people every year) than to be killed by a shark. Best of all, according to figures published by the New York City Health Department, you are 20 times more likely to be bitten by a New Yorker than you are by a shark.

But perhaps the most shocking statistic – and this really puts things into perspective – is that we kill many millions of sharks every year. Does that make headline news? No, of course not, because most people don't care.

Yet even if sharks were dangerous, we should still protect them. As top predators, their disappearance would disrupt entire ocean ecosystems. I feel passionately that we should respect and care for them – as we should for all wildlife – dangerous or not. An ocean without sharks is unthinkable, like the Serengeti without lions. 🐾

MARK CARWARDINE is a frustrated and frank conservationist.

WHAT DO YOU THINK? If you want to support Mark in his views or shoot him down in flames, email wildlifeletters@immediate.co.uk



The great white shark is an apex predator, but is more interested in feasting on seals than humans.