

Santa Cruz Sentinel

How many sharks in the sea?

Enviros want feds to reconsider endangered status

By Jason Hoppin
December 24 2013

MONTEREY -- Environmental groups are appealing a federal finding that West Coast great white sharks aren't teetering on the brink of extinction.

With concerns that the number of white sharks was dangerously low, last year Monterey-based Oceana and the San Francisco-based Center for Biological Diversity asked the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to look into special protections for the species.

A team of federal researchers looked into the request, eventually deciding white sharks in this part of the Pacific Ocean were a distinct species that could be considered for listing under the Endangered Species Act.

But they also found the numbers of sharks to be far higher than estimated -- possibly in the thousands -- and said there is a high probability that the population is actually on the upswing.

Last week, environmentalists asked for a second look at that conclusion, arguing that NOAA is overestimating how many sharks are out there beyond locales where researchers typically observe them.

"The fundamental question is, there are some knowns and there are some unknowns, and what do you guess the unknowns are?" said Geoff Shester, Oceana's California program director. "We want some answers -- where are those sharks? You can't just basically guess how many there are."

White shark research is still an emerging field, and there remain many unknowns about the fearsome predator. But a 2011 census by UC Davis and Stanford University researchers caused alarm, estimating just 219 adult and subadult sharks along the West Coast of California, and a total of 339 when a population near Mexico's Guadalupe Island is included.

But NOAA's review found that count to be a very low percentage of the total population, underscoring the scientific difficulty in estimating fish populations. NOAA based its conclusions on several factors, including that the 2011 count skewed heavily toward male sharks -- a sign many female sharks were missed.

"At this point I would say that nothing has happened that would impact our assessment, and it seems like every week there is another report of a (white shark) sighting," said Heidi Dewar, who led NOAA's team of National Marine Fisheries Service researchers. Oceana and the Center for Biological Diversity also question NOAA's estimates of how many sharks are swept up in commercial fishing nets each year. In its initial findings, NOAA acknowledged uncertainties but noted fishing is limited in white sharks' nursery habitat.

"(Researchers) felt that it was unlikely that six vessels operating in a small portion of the nursery habitat could remove more than 20 (percent) of the (young) white sharks in a given year," the report concluded.

Environmental groups say it's entirely possible, pointing to a handful of recent studies that collectively tagged seven shark pups. Within six months, five of the tags had been recovered, with two confirmed dead sharks and more probable.

"It is not exactly astonishing or implausible for bycatch mortality to be that high," Shester said.

NOAA researchers also said there was anecdotal evidence to support a larger population of sharks, including more reported attacks on otters and sea lions.

A request to have white sharks listed as endangered under state law is pending.