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A Shark's Tale: Anti-Conservation and Fishing for Maneaters in the Wake of the 1916 Shark Attacks

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Abstract

This paper explores the aftermath of the Jersey Shore shark attacks in the summer of 1916 and how the public's newfound fear of sharks increased the prevalence of shark fishing for sport and for profit. While current historiography views big game hunters during this period as the founders of the conservationist movement, the rhetoric that surrounded the hunting of sharks provides evidence that shark hunters may have been a notable exception to that claim. Firmly established as monsters that were challenging to catch and kill, sharks became prey that men could hunt as an act to prove their masculinity and connection to nature, but with a more heightened level of malice and violence towards their catch than was typically seen in sport hunting. Through an examination of newspaper articles, fishing columns, scientific journals, and hunting narratives from the time of the attacks in 1916 through the 1940s, this paper outlines the various contexts in which sharks were hunted and how an attitude of anti-conservation was commonly adopted.

In 1916 along the Jersey Shore there were a series of fatal shark attacks that shocked the country. Beachgoers that were previously told that ocean water was as safe as their bathtub at home were fleeing resorts, fearing that they may be the next victim of what seemed to be an elusive, predatory sea monster. Over the course of two weeks that summer four people had died, and the coun-

try was left to come to a new understanding about sharks. Many concluded that they posed a threat to innocent members of the community and tourists along the shore. By this time in American history, the tradition and popularity of hunting big game for sport was well established, as personified by Theodore Roosevelt, perhaps most famous for his travels to Africa to hunt rhinos. A few decades prior to the events in 1916 he had set a lot of precedents for these activities and spent time promoting hunting in the American West. Going on a hunting expedition was a man's way of signaling masculinity in an era when many people were losing touch with the natural world around them in the country as corporate jobs became more common. With the shark attacks of 1916, a new kind of big game prey for these sportsmen entered the field. In the years that following the attacks, besides the people who hunted sharks as a diversion, there were also commercial interests that began to advocate for increased industrial shark fishing for profit. Like the sportsmen, these new industrial efforts shared the rhetoric that they were doing a service for their communities by exterminating shark populations. The reputation of sharks as monsters after the 1916 attacks led hunter-sportsman, and later corporate industrial interests, to argue for eradication of sharks. While historians often pose hunters as the original conservationists, the shark attacks in 1916 changed the relationship between hunters and the ocean environment that eventually led the way to an industrialized hunting of sharks to near eradication.

In Tara Kelly's *The Hunter Elite: Manly Sport, Hunting Narratives, and American Conservation, 1880–1925*, she engages with her own set of historiography regarding the history of hunting in America. She rejects the assumption that other historians have made that there is no history to hunting, and that it has always remained the same, simply being an act of violence that some people have used to survive, or others have used as diversion.¹ Kelly argues that at the turn of the twentieth-century in the United States, hunting took on new meanings and became about much more than just the straightforward violence of the act. It reflected on a man's character how they hunted and became a way in which men could prove their manliness, especially as the country was settling into being industrialized and men's jobs were becoming corporatized. In the process of making her argument, Kelly draws largely on the popular hunting sportsmen stories that were widely published and circulated among the American public, and that popularity reflected how the story that went along with the hunting was often just as, if not more important than the actual hunting itself.² In this paper, a few of the stories that were published during this time about men fishing for sharks will be addressed, and the same values that Kelly argued were perpetuated by these sorts of narratives for the hunters of other big game apply here as well. One claim that Kelly makes about the nature of the traditional hunter sportsman narrative that the tales of shark fishing disagree with is that they "glorify the stalk and minimize the kill."³ Undeniably, a part of this is certainly because the process of killing a shark is a bit more involved than that of killing a moose or a bear, animals that can be shot from a distance. Should the long struggle of reeling in the shark that is commonly highlighted and glorified be con-

sidered a part of the stalking, or the killing? The greater detail given about how sharks were killed contributes to the claim that there was more malice, or perhaps a greater feeling of justice being dealt, behind these hunts than is typically given to other big game. Because of the circumstances of the 1916 shark attacks, the attitude and values that were used in the sport of fishing for sharks deviated from the traditional values that characterized hunter-sportsmen's relationship with their prey. Hunters are widely considered to be the first animal conservation activists in the United States, but in the case of shark fishermen that is not true.

To supplement Kelly's work and give a greater background on the landscape of masculinity connected to sportsmen-hunters during this period, Gail Bederman's *Manliness and Civilization* discusses how Theodore Roosevelt came to reset the image of the "manly man" in the United States. The period she examines in her book, between 1880 and 1917 leads right into the period that will be focused on in this paper, laying a good groundwork for how the cultural structure of big game hunting and masculinity developed. To prove his virility, the American man needed to lead a "strenuous life" or act more like a "Western man," engaging with the brutal and gritty qualities of nature and overcome them.⁴ Men were encouraged to embrace the natural world, where they might be afforded the chance to demonstrate "heroic acts of masculinity by killing fierce animals." The reason hunters became the first conservationists in the country was in the interest of maintaining the land and animals so they could continue their hunting, as an expression of "natural masculinity."⁵ Applying this to the context of shark fishing, men's want to express their masculinity and position as "the most powerful animal of all" is certainly present. They do not, however, share the same sentiment

¹Tara Kathleen Kelly. *The Hunter Elite: Manly Sport, Hunting Narratives, and American Conservation, 1880-1925*. (University Press of Kansas, 2018), 2.

²Kelly, 8.

³Kelly, 52.

⁴Gail Bederman. "Theodore Roosevelt: Manhood, Nation, and 'Civilization'" in *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (University of Chicago Press, 1995), 171.

⁵Bederman, 174.

about conservation regarding sharks, seemingly hunting them without a care if the shark population was being depleted.

In *See America First: Tourism and National Identity, 1880-1940*, Marguerite Shaffer looks at American tourism around the turn of the century, which provides a lot of context for the landscape that the 1916 attacks effected. Her argument centers on how tourism became more prominent in the United States during this period and was promoted more heavily as the country steadily became more corporate.⁶ Like Kelly, Shaffer focuses on the values that became attached to travelling in the wilderness of the country, making it an act that could reflect an individual's or family's patriotism.⁷ The ways in which individuals and families could support their country, in a broad sense, through their travelling and connecting to nature in the West can be closely compared to the formed character of the big game hunter that Kelly and Bederman highlighted in their arguments. The source material in this book also relies heavily on personal narratives and published stories that were often widely circulated, showing how the values were instilled and expressed in popular culture.

In Connie Chiang's *Shaping the Shoreline: Fisheries and Tourism on the Monterey Coast*, she has made an argument that is much more specific than the previous historians mentioned. Her research focuses specifically on the Monterey coast in California, and the fishing industry that was establishing itself during the period that this paper is focusing on. The argument highlights the tension that existed between the commercial fishing industry and the tourist industry in the area. Those who were interested in attracting commercial tourism and wanted to put up resorts and bring hobby fishermen to the area conflicted with those who wanted to expand industrial fishing.⁸ Not

only was this a clash of financial interests, but it also had a lot to do with the different socio-economic classes in the area. Those interested in making a profit in commercial fishing for food were more likely lower class and immigrant communities in California, while those interested in making a profit from tourism in the area were middle to upper class, concerned with attracting more middle and upper class, suburban, white Americans to the area. Both groups, as Chiang argues, fought for dominance on the shoreline as their efforts often conflicted with each other.⁹

The question of how the commercial fishery and tourist industries conflicted with each other that Chiang centered in her work is another lens in which shark fishing between 1916 to 1940 in the United States can be examined. After the shark attacks in 1916, hunting sharks for sport became a common activity among hobby fishermen. As the years went on others began to see the value in catching sharks commercially and harvesting the products they could get from them, whether those be leather from their skin, oil from their livers, or their meat. Rather than conflicting in the way Chiang describes, I will argue that in pursuit of their separate interests, the leisure shark fishermen and the emergent industrial shark catching operations shared common rhetoric against the conservation of sharks. While I will be looking primarily at how sharks fit into hunter-sportsman culture and tradition from that period, I will also be examining how perhaps the same attitude of retribution against them also existed within the industrial realm. In both Kelly and Shaffer's works, they emphasize a change in characterization during this period that hunting and tourism both experienced in the United States, which is also applicable to the rise of shark fishing. Values of manliness, being in touch with the wilderness in the country, and patriotism are all in play, but instead of being driven primarily by the rise of corporate America

⁶Marguerite Shaffer. *See America First: Tourism and National Identity, 1880-1940*. (Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001), 1.

⁷Shaffer, 3.

⁸Connie Chiang. *Shaping the Shoreline: Fisheries and*

Tourism on the Monterey Coast. (University of Washington Press, 2008), 9.

⁹Chiang, 10

as Kelly argues, the motivation to hunt sharks was unique. Because of the reputation they gained in 1916, sharks became a species that people could hold a grudge against. They were characterized as monsters, but the thrill of putting oneself in an intentionally life-threatening situation where they were ensured a good story at the end was the appeal for many middle- and upper-class people who could afford the trip and the equipment, or at least knew someone they could tag along with. How the sharks were viewed as prey by the differently motivated groups that hunted them, and how their attitudes may or may not have varied will be an interesting point to examine in this argument.

In the days following the 1916 shark attacks, press across the country published detailed accounts of the shock and horror felt not only by the local coastal communities, but the whole country. The response efforts that were put into action were also reported on heavily, as the stories captured national attention. The first attack occurred on July 1st to a 28-year-old man named Charles Epting Vansant on the beach in Beach Haven, New Jersey. He died of his wounds after being dragged to shore. As the first victim in this series of attacks, he did not receive front page headlines, but rather smaller mentions of his being “bitten to death.”¹⁰ The second death occurred on July 6th in Spring Lake, New Jersey to a 27-year-old bell boy, Charles Bruder, who worked at one of the local beach front resorts. His death was written about in great detail in the press, with the scene being described as occurring in front of hundreds of beachgoers who alerted the guards after hearing a scream, only for the lifeguards to bring Bruder to shore missing both of his legs and a chunk out of his side.¹¹ In a piece from the *New York Times*, one of the first accounts of a hunting patrol setting out in search of the responsible shark is reported on, led by a Colonel that worked for the

¹⁰“Shark Kills Physician,” *Connecticut Western News*, July 6, 1916.

¹¹“Attacked by a Shark,” *Alexandria Gazette* (Alexandria, Virginia), July 7, 1916.

state’s governor.¹² From the coverage of various Philadelphia publications, these first two attacks had the entirety of New Jersey in a panic, with reports of close calls with sharks popping up in the days before the next attacks, frightening already jumpy beachgoers.¹³ About a week later, on July 12th, there were three attacks, two fatal, that really solidified these stories as front-page headlines that garnered national conversation. The first death was that of Lester Stillwell, a boy reported to be between 10- and 12-years-old in Matawan Creek, who had been pulled under the water away from his group of friends who were in with him. The second death was that of Stanley Fisher, a 24-year-old who had been searching for Lester in the water later in the day. Some reports claim that he had found Lester’s body when he himself fell victim to what many believed to be the same attacker. It took another two days before Lester’s body was eventually recovered.¹⁴ The final reported attack on that day in Matawan Creek was that of Joseph Dunn, a 14-year-old who lost a leg, but ultimately survived the incident.¹⁵

Of these three, it is the death of Lester Stillwell that really caught the country’s attention. In Matawan, because the attacks occurred in the creek inland rather than off the coast of the ocean, the local forces that went out to hunt the shark or sharks responsible were able to block off the end of the waterway with chicken wire in the hope of cornering the culprit. Men went out in row boats, or any other personal boat they might have had, armed with shotguns, boat hooks, harpoons, pikes, and dynamite, which they employed in their pursuit of the shark. Reporters began to characterize these efforts by the locals as “a new sport,

¹²“Shark Kills Bather Off Jersey Beach,” *New York Times*, July 7, 1916.

¹³“Shark Frightens Bathing Throng at Spring Lake,” *Evening Ledger* (Philadelphia, PA), July 8, 1916.

¹⁴“Shark-Infested Stream Gives Up Boy’s Torn Body,” *Evening Ledger* (Philadelphia, PA), July 14, 1916.

¹⁵“Giant Shark Slain, Find Corpse Inside,” *El Paso Herald* (El Paso, Texas), July 13, 1916.

combined with a public service,”¹⁶ an early acknowledgement that hunting sharks was joining the league of big game hunting, while also serving a practical purpose as a defensive force between sharks and beachgoers. But beyond being a “new sport,” the use of dynamite and guns made it very clear that the goal was the killing and destruction of the sharks, with no consideration of harvesting meat or making trophies of them in this period directly after the attacks. There was also a fairly quick response from federal authorities to help with the new danger along the Jersey Shore, as on July 15th, the Secretary of the Treasury announced that the Coast Guard would be employed “to do what it could toward clearing the coast of the dangerous fish and preventing further loss of life.”¹⁷ These efforts indicate just how unfamiliar most people were with sharks and shark fishing, as even the “professionals” that were called in used a variety of methods to capture and kill just one.

To properly get a sense of the buzz that initially surrounded these attacks and the news cycle’s portrayal of them, it is important to note that prior to these events the discussion of whether sharks did pose any danger to humans was debated, and many believed the answer to be no. In a scientific bulletin published in April of 1916, the researchers state that there were “Few authenticated cases [that] exist of their attacking a living man in the water,” and that it was their view that “it is a popular fallacy to call any large, fierce-looking shark a ‘man-eater.’”¹⁸ In their report the researchers went further to try and explain why people widely believe them to have an “evil spirit,” attributing it to their ugly faces and menacing fins. Finally, they make a statement about the sort of feeling a fisherman gets when they catch one, as

they claim that “his toughness, his brutal nerveless vitality and insensibility to physical injury, fail to elicit the admiration one feels for the dashing, brilliant, destructive gastronomic bluefish, tunny, or salmon.”¹⁹ Not only were sharks set apart from other fish here, but they were characterized as less respectable or noble in their character. A story from Honolulu that made a few papers across the country in 1916 prior to the attacks also reiterated a similar idea, because it reported that native Hawaiians believed sharks to be harmless to humans, with one headline reading “Sharks Bite? They’re Afraid, Hawaiians Claim.” One source for the article called them “cowards,” insisting that they would never attack a person in the water with them.²⁰ Another particularly interesting example of how shark attacks were called into question prior to the events in 1916 came from a millionaire in 1893 named Herman Oelrichs, who set a five-hundred-dollar reward for anyone who could provide evidence of a shark attack occurring in “temperate waters” off the beach.²¹ And while there were many who attempted to meet his demands and tell him their stories, he was never satisfied enough to award anyone the prize. The lack of a winner led many people to believe that Oelrichs was correct, and that tales of sharks as man-eaters were untrue.²² In an opinion article published a few weeks after the attacks, there was a mention to that prize and another set in Florida around the same time, and it seemed to suggest that Oelrichs’ challenge was created and publicized by beach resorts in order to assure the public that there was no danger at their beaches.²³

Accounts of people who believed sharks were

¹⁶“Many See Sharks, But All Get Away,” *New York Times*, July 14, 1916.

¹⁷“War on Sharks,” *Alexandria Gazette* (Alexandria, VA), July 15, 1916.

¹⁸John Treadwell Nichols and Robert Cushman Murphy. “Long Island Fauna. The Sharks.” *Brooklyn Museum Science Bulletin* (April 24, 1916), 2.

¹⁹Treadwell and Murphy, 4.

²⁰“Sharks Bite? They’re Afraid, Hawaiians Claim,” *Charlevoix County Herald* (East Jordan, Michigan), March 4, 1916.

²¹“Sharks Do Not Bite,” *Hanford Journal* (Hanford, California), September 1893.

²²“Sharks’ Ravages on Jersey Coast Puzzle to Science,” *Evening Ledger* (Philadelphia, PA), July 7, 1916.

²³Frederick J. Haskin, “The Shark Panic,” *The Evening Star*, July 20, 1916.

harmless were mentioned in multiple articles that immediately followed the two initial 1916 attacks, as the discussion centered on what might have caused these attacks and how the opinion on sharks could have possibly been so wrong before. There were specialists consulted from the American Museum of Natural History, who were representatives of the “science” that many articles proclaimed had been proven wrong by these incidents. The director of the museum at the time, Dr. F. A. Lucas, in his statement to the *New York Times*, conceded that sharks were “sometimes man-killers,” but insisted that the chances of getting bitten by a shark were as likely as getting “struck by lightning.”²⁴ That quote was quickly printed and used as a handout to visitors to the Natural History Museum’s quickly put together shark exhibit for the summer, as well as at the affected resorts that were seeing an immediate loss of visitors.²⁵ Among the public, there swirled many different theories on what the cause might have been. Some believed the sharks’ closeness to the shore was due to a scarcity of their usual food supply in their native waters, and that an increased amount of dumping by commercial fishermen in the Delaware Bay area was drawing them in. Another widely believed theory was that the Great War that was on-going in Europe at the time was the cause, whether that be because of the increased submarine and naval activity on the European side of the Atlantic, or because of the halting of American cruises across the Atlantic were also a main source of food for sharks because of all of the food they would dump.²⁶ Others, particularly locals of shore towns, believed that the cause was simply some unexplained impulse by the sharks to come closer, and nothing else.²⁷ In the weeks

²⁴“Many See Sharks, But All Get Away,” *New York Times*, July 14, 1916.

²⁵“Scoffs at Shark Peril,” *The Sunday Star* (Washington, DC), August 27, 1916.

²⁶“Sharks’ Ravages on Jersey Coast Puzzle to Science,” *Evening Ledger* (Philadelphia, PA), July 7, 1916.

²⁷“Shore Men Try to Explain Presence of Big Man-Eaters,” *Evening Ledger* (Philadelphia, PA), July 7, 1916.

after the attacks some papers reported that perhaps sharks had been eating people all along, but they had gone unnoticed because they were “cases where sharks simply swallowed people who had fallen overboard.”²⁸ These mixed reactions and theories among the public show the level of speculation and interest that these attacks had. People were looking for an explanation, and ultimately, they never really got one. The “official sources” and “scientific authorities” would dismiss some of these rumors, like that the war in Europe was a cause, but what led the sharks to attack so many people in such a short span of time was never a question that was definitively answered. Some researchers even debated whether the attacks were caused by sharks at all (some claimed it was more likely to have been a killer whale), only muddying the waters even more.²⁹ But in the end, none of these searches for an explanation really mattered all that much to people, and these discussions fell away. What was left in the public’s consciousness was the events themselves, and the undeniable proof they supplied of what sharks were capable of if they were hungry and encountered a person who might be enjoying their summer vacation in the water.

The gore, the unexpectedness, the monstrous image of the sharks themselves, and most importantly the fear that the press depicted in its coverage of these events left a lasting impression. These were big, breaking stories that the papers did not need to alter to make them sensational headlines. There were gory details from each attack that they did not hold back on divulging to their readers. The scenes of beachgoers that noticed a commotion in the water and alerted lifeguards were commonly repeated, with one person usually the first to cry out, and then “others realized it was blood that colored the water and

²⁸“The Shark Family,” *The Burlington Free Press and Times* (Burlington, Vermont), August 3, 1916.

²⁹“Many See Sharks, But All Get Away,” *New York Times*, July 14, 1916.

women fainted at the sight.”³⁰ Descriptions of the bodies were also given as they were seen when dragged to shore, always detailing how much of their legs remained and whether or not they had any other bodily wounds as they bled out. In the case of Lester Stillwell, who was not recovered right away, there were descriptions of his mangled body with “many terrible gashes on his body and flesh stripped from his legs,” once he was found.³¹ Along with this coverage, as mentioned previously, many stories recounted the efforts of the hunting parties that went out in search of the sharks after the attacks, armed with just about every weapon available to them, including dynamite. It was believed that the sharks, however, were so strong that the only guaranteed way to kill one was by harpooning them or shooting them multiple times.³²

As time passed, the memory of the attacks in 1916 remained in the public's consciousness, with mentions of it included in news articles written during subsequent shark fishing seasons. In an article published in 1929, a local fishing guide wrote how local hobby fishermen were preparing for the season, stating that “Man eating sharks visit these parts. This was proved a number of years ago when one traveled up the coast making three kills of bathers.”³³ This quote from the very end of piece at first reads as a disconnected element from the rest of the article, which made no mention of shark attacks, but this mention's purpose might be a kind of call-to-action statement or explanation of why these fishermen are hunting sharks specifically. There were often more subtle reminders in stories about shark fishing as well, in which the storytellers bring up the violence sharks are capable of as man-eaters that “can take the arm or leg

off a human being without any difficulty.”³⁴ The memory of these traumatic events is what earned sharks their reputation as monsters and added the element of risk and service that attracted many of the fishermen that began hunting them regularly.

The 1916 attacks had different implications for the fishing interests along the East Coast than they did for the tourist industry. Regarding tourism, particularly from Jersey Shore to Long Island, the million-dollar resorts predicted that they would lose about half of their visitors and revenue for that summer and the next, citing sea-bathing as their main attraction.³⁵ Many articles reporting on the initial attacks warned the public from “undue alarm in view of the long period of uninterrupted safety they have enjoyed,” even though of course the public was encouraged to remain cautious.³⁶ Statements like these, as well as the opinion of the Natural History Museum director mentioned previously, were all attempts to reassure the public that the danger was not as serious as it seemed to be, but they were arguably not very effective. Seen from the perspective of the commercial fishing industry on the East Coast, however, these attacks were a great opportunity to promote interest in catching sharks specifically.

To commercial fisheries, the shark had always been an economic nuisance, scaring away large schools of fish or damaging valuable nets. This was the primary reason they wanted shark populations eradicated, and the 1916 attacks opened the door for greater discussion about how fishermen could make a profit from the products of sharks, ultimately creating an industry around them.³⁷ Sharks were reported to have a variety of uses, as their livers could be harvested for fish-oil and vita-

³⁰“Shark Kills Bather Off Jersey Shore,” *New York Times*, July 7, 1916.

³¹“Mangled Body of Victim of Shark Recovered Today,” *The Daily Capital Journal* (Salem, Oregon), July 16, 1916.

³²“Many See Sharks, But All Get Away,” *New York Times*, July 14, 1916.

³³“Shark Fishermen Get All Set for Season,” *Philadelphia Inquirer* (Philadelphia, PA), February 3, 1929.

³⁴“Shark Fishermen Enjoying Selves,” *Philadelphia Inquirer* (Philadelphia, PA), July 9, 1933.

³⁵“Atlantic Coast Summer Resorts Damaged for Millions by Presence of the Sharks,” *Fergus Country Democrat* (Lewis County, MO), July 27, 1916.

³⁶“Jersey Coast's Shark Peril Unprecedented,” *The Sunday Star* (Washington, DC), July 9, 1916.

³⁷Frederick J. Haskin, “The Shark Panic,” *The Evening Star*, July 20, 1916.

min supplements and their meat and fins could be promoted as palatable and desirable foods, particularly in demand among Asian American communities on the West Coast. East Coast fisheries saw the opportunity to become the supplier of these products that were otherwise being imported from outside of the country. Their eyes and teeth were reported to be good for making jewelry, and what is left of them could be sold as fertilizer.³⁸ Another use that was highly promoted was the use of their skin to make leather, particularly for shoes. It was reported to be a cheaper, stronger, and more abundant product that could be of great use throughout the country, especially during times there was a scarcity of regular leather, as most of the articles in which this discussion appears surround either the end of the first World War or the beginning of the second when such shortages were common.³⁹ And while these economic interests both play important contextual roles to this discussion, they both leave out the fishermen who were motivated to hunt sharks for their own diversion.

The initial accounts of hunting parties that went out to catch the man-eaters reiterated the great challenge that it was to catch and kill a shark, who seemed to be able to withstand all kinds of violence before finally dying, which only added to the image of nobility and service to community that was attributed to the hunters. In their efforts to build up the image of the fishermen, many papers leaned further into making negative, personified characterizations of sharks. In a description of whaling sailors who were attempting a kill a shark that was eating at their catch, one sailor recounted that “So callous to suffering and so greedy are the sharks, however, that even after they have been mutilated, they will return again and again to attack the carcass.” The

³⁸“Mr. Shark Gets a Reputation—He’s Valuable Now,” *Philadelphia Inquirer* (Philadelphia, PA), July 14, 1935.

³⁹Frederick J. Haskin, “Ocean Leather May Solve Problem of High Cost of Footwear and Provide Country With a New Industry,” *El Paso Herald* (El Paso, TX), September 5, 1919.

same article makes the statement that “An evil spirit of the deep he seems, for there is something about him that fills man with that instinctive dread felt for the snake.”⁴⁰ In a novel written by a self-proclaimed “pioneer shark hunter,” William E. Young described instances in which “Some sharks have been hooked, shot full of lead from a repeating rifle, then harpooned, hauled on deck and disemboweled, yet have continued alive and alert for a long while, thrashing their tails and opening and shutting their weird, expressionless eyes.”⁴¹ These accounts were focusing on the unnaturalness that sharks seem to exhibit in their behavior and resistance to injury and the unease that evokes in people. Because of the greater challenge and danger that they posed, those that still chose to go out and take them on, whether that be in response to an attack or just for the thrill of it, were seen as noble heroes, prevailing over what most viewed instinctually as evil. In these accounts, the counterargument to Kelly’s claim that the big game hunter narrative is all about the journey rather than the kill itself can be found, as the stories in the papers and in books written on the subject all divulge quite a bit of detail and seem to revel in the killing of the fish itself more than the typical game hunter. Perhaps it could be said that that is just the nature of fishing, that it often takes hours of fighting to get the shark on to a boat or the shore and properly killed. But it could also be argued to be an expression of conquest over a creature that many perceived to have an evil spirit or was seen as an adversary in a more extreme way than big game hunters usually regarded their prey. In many cases, hobby fishermen did not harvest any products to sell or use from the sharks they caught, so the way in which a shark was emaciated in the process of being killed did not matter. They simply ensured that the shark was good and

⁴⁰Tigers of the Sea,” *The Sun* (New York, New York), July 16, 1916.

⁴¹William E. Young, *Shark! Shark! The Thirty Year Odyssey of A Pioneer Shark Hunter* (New York: Gotham House, 1934), 16-17.

dead, measured it if it was a big catch, and then cast the corpse away or used it as chum to catch more of the “sea cannibals.”⁴²

Hobby shark hunters were thrill seekers who were engaging in something that was uniquely dangerous and challenging that they could use as expressions of their masculinity. Not only were sharks a large fish that put up a long fight on a fishing rod, but they had gained a reputation as one of humanity's great enemies from the animal kingdom, capable of causing great harm as exemplified by the two weeks of attacks in 1916. Hunting sharks specifically remained a bit of an oddity to the fishing world, as one fishing column wrote “It is one of the unusual sports of saltwater anglers, engaged in simply for the thrill and not for profit.”⁴³ For these sportsmen it was “indulged in solely for excitement,” and was described as an addictive kind of thrill that “once a man gets bit by the bug he becomes a hopeless enthusiast on the subject. It is not a sport for a weakling.”⁴⁴ The amount of strength that was required to reel in and kill a shark was important, adding another element to what might have appealed to many men who engaged in the sport. Besides being thrilling, it was a way in which men could prove they were not “weaklings,” that they were masculine and strong enough to conquer a formidable foe. Here one can see how the shark hunters paralleled the traditional values of the hunter sportsman character already established in the United States. In a fishing handbook published in 1931 entitled *Florida Fishing*, the author notes that shark fishing might be particularly attractive to working- and middle-class men who might not have the money or time for other kinds of thrill seeking or hunting. He wrote that, “The laymen, or those who cannot venture outside, either for reasons of finance or not able to

stand the rolling swells can find this sport probably to their liking.”⁴⁵ People did not need a boat to try their hand at shark fishing because it could be done from the beach, making it a more accessible way in which American men could express their masculinity in the image of the “Western man” that Bederman described in her work. Shark fishing in this period was about more than humanity asserting their dominance as the strongest of animals, it was about retaliation against a species that had acted maliciously against them and gotten away with it. This was men against a monster that was only pursued by “a few brave fishermen, willing to take their lives in their hands,”⁴⁶ a test of masculinity that was arguably greater because of the increased risk and history.

Reducing the population of sharks was seen as a positive by industrial interests and hunter sportsmen alike. Their anti-conservationist attitude toward the shark population was backed up by the idea that they were doing a conservationist service for the food fish that industrial interests wanted left alone. A Philadelphia newspaper wrote in 1930 about the process that hobby shark fishers went through with each catch, explaining that “Every fish that is brought on board the boat is cut open to see what it has been feeding upon. Mostly the stomachs are found to contain fish. Every shark that is killed means one less to prey upon food fish. For that reason the sport is a step toward conservation.”⁴⁷ Sharks, while also being viewed as monsters and threats to innocent beachgoers, were seen as pests and treated as though they were some sort of invasive species that had gotten out of control. In a fishing guidebook by a British man, F. D. Holcombe, he began his chapter on sharks by acknowledging that there were a great number of sea anglers who would not agree

⁴²“Weakfish, Sea Bass Plentiful in Bays,” *Philadelphia Inquirer* (Philadelphia, PA), August 17, 1930.

⁴³“Shark Fishermen Enjoying Selves” *Philadelphia Inquirer* (Philadelphia, PA), July 9, 1933.

⁴⁴“Shark Fishermen Get All Set for Season,” *Philadelphia Inquirer* (Philadelphia, PA), February 3, 1929.

⁴⁵Stewart Miller, *Florida Fishing* (New York: G. H. Watt, 1931), 319.

⁴⁶“Mr. Shark Gets a Reputation—He's Valuable Now,” *Philadelphia Inquirer* (Philadelphia, PA), July 14, 1935.

⁴⁷“Weakfish, Sea Bass Plentiful in Bays,” *Philadelphia Inquirer* (Philadelphia, PA), August 17, 1930

with him adding sharks to a proper list of sporting fish. He noted that he “has come across several men who look down on shark fishing as something altogether beneath their notice, classing sharks as vermin—which they undoubtedly are.” He recommended pursuing sharks to British anglers only if they found themselves without another option to catch a “hefty” fish, another example of the importance the size and the fight of a fish had to those fishing for diversion.⁴⁸ In the *Florida Fishing* handbook mentioned previously a similar sentiment was expressed, although the author seemed much more enthusiastic as he recounted his own experiences assisting shark fishermen in his travels. He admitted that he personally did not hold the shark in very high regard as a sporting fish, but stated that if you were looking for a challenge “there is no doubt that you will find some joy, some thrill, in this type of fishing. It should be encouraged if only to protect our real game fish that are in Florida waters to entertain the anglers who come here from all parts of the world to fish.”⁴⁹ Here the author is reiterating that one of the major benefits of catching sharks is the room that would be made for the more desirable species of fish to thrive. But rather than referring to food fish that other sources have cited as convenient to protect, he seemed to mean other large sporting fish, which would benefit the tourism in Florida, another industry that had been shown to be considerably affected in cases of a shark sightings or attacks along the coast. In a newspaper article focused on the newfound demand and profits that could be made from catching and processing shark products in 1935, the journalist concluded with an upbeat tone, “The sailor’s old enemy is proving to be a friend after all. And much to the bather’s delight, the shark will likely become extinct in a few years if the demand for his ‘hide’ keeps up.”⁵⁰

⁴⁸F. D. Holcombe, *Modern Sea Angling* (London: Frederick Warne Co., 1921), 140.

⁴⁹Miller, 320.

⁵⁰“Mr. Shark Gets a Reputation—He’s Valuable Now,” *Philadelphia Inquirer* (Philadelphia, PA), July 14, 1935.

This obviously was not the end result from the increased industrial fishing for sharks, but it is a good example of the way the possibility of eradicating shark populations entirely was viewed. It seemed to be something that would only have benefits for humanity generally, and more specifically for food fisherman, sports-anglers, and beachgoers, so there was no reason not to see extinction as a positive inevitability.

The shark attacks on the Jersey Shore in 1916 put sharks into the public’s consciousness in a lasting way and opened the door for many to profit from their widespread demonization. Prior to the attacks, there were some scientists and public figures who claimed that sharks would never attack a human in the water along the beach, which made the short span of time that saw multiple fatalities caused by sharks even more jarring for the country. The press published headlines and detailed reports to represent the fear experienced by the beach resort guests that were quickly fleeing their vacations to avoid being the next fatality that summer. Hunting parties were immediately mobilized to pursue the monsters they believed were responsible, and in those days after the final attacks, there is evidence that hunting for sharks was already being considered a new kind of big game hunting that had the benefit being characterized as a noble pursuit that would help potentially save the community from further harm. In the years that followed the attacks this would remain true, as hobby shark fishermen were seen as brave men doing a service to humanity by getting rid of as many sharks as they could.

Sharks became another kind of big prey for men to hunt in the traditional sense of sportsman-hunting that was already well established by 1916 in the United States. Men who participated were going out into nature and proving their masculinity by using their brute strength to overtake what had become in many people’s minds a great threat to unsuspecting humans. A characterization of big game hunters that shark-anglers did not share, however, was the propensity to support conserva-

tionist efforts to preserve their prey for posterity's sake. Many historians have argued that big game hunters in the United States were the first conservationists in the country, and while that is broadly true, in the case of shark hunters in the period after the 1916 shark attacks that claim does not apply. Catching and killing sharks was seen by many as comparable to pest control. For industrial fishermen that caught food fish, sharks were a great nuisance and took away from efficiency and potential profits. For the tourism industry, an ocean with fewer sharks, or none at all, would cause business to boom because people would never hesitate to book their beach-side vacation in fear. In the case of sport fishermen who were after other kinds of big catches like swordfish, the eradication of the sharks in the area would make their pursuits easier and allow them to visit other fishing destinations more easily as tourists themselves in search of diverse species. As the years went on and the market for products that could be harvested from sharks grew, the enthusiasm to continue depleting shark populations on the East Coast only increased. The groups in favor of shark fishing were in fact in favor of conservation, just not for the sharks. They were in favor of conserving the profitable fish that the sharks naturally preyed upon and in favor of conserving the various industries of tourism and fishing that were adversely affected by a widespread fear of sharks.

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