



WEST PALM BEACH FISHING CLUB

~ Established 1934 ~



July 29, 2020

Jessica McCawley, Director
Division of Marine Fisheries Management
Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission
2590 Executive Center Circle E, Suite 201
Tallahassee, FL 32301

Dear Jessica,

On behalf of the over 1,400 members of the West Palm Beach Fishing Club (WPBFC) I wanted to share concerns related to an observed increase in angler/shark interactions and resulting depredation. I first want to make clear that we recognize the valuable role apex predators play in the marine ecosystem. Our comments are in no way meant to suggest that the WPBFC wants to return to the days of overfishing sharks. We have, in fact, commented in past years that some shark species needed more protection. Species such as lemon, tiger and hammerhead deserve current protections. However, bull and sandbar shark interactions appear to be getting worse in our region, both in state and federal waters.

For example, commercial and recreational fishing vessels fishing out of Boynton, Palm Beach, Jupiter and St. Lucie Inlets are encountering sharks on a far more regular basis than in years past. Last year was bad. This year is worse. For perspective, here are anecdotal observations from area anglers & captains:

- Charter and recreational boats targeting sailfish are now having their sailfish eaten by sharks. This is certainly not unheard of, however it used to only occur on very rare occasions. Most charter boats berthed at Sailfish Marina located in Palm Beach Shores can attest to the increased frequency of shark/sailfish depredation.
- Drift fishing boats encounter sharks during most trips to the reef. Many reef fish like yellowtail snapper, mutton snapper, amberjack, cobia and kingfish are being lost to sharks. We suspect that number is significant. This includes undersized snappers and other species that are caught and being released using recompression devices.
- This problem is so persistent in some areas, like the Juno Ledge, that sharks often show

up before fishing lines are deployed. Evidently they are so conditioned they simply respond to the sound of boat motors.

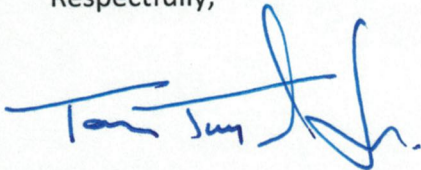
- One or more sizable sharks have now taken up residence inshore at the Sailfish Marina docks. They certainly are fun to watch, but their persistent presence is not normal with past experience.

This issue prompts a number of important questions:

- Are these resident sharks or are they moving through our region? (a tagging study might answer this question)
- Could these observations and the resulting depredation have negative impacts to reef fish populations?
- Size limits, bag limits and seasonal closures help us manage fish populations sustainably. Could the increase in shark depredation upset the balance?
- Have changes in commercial shark fishing regulations contributed?
- Should a sustainable commercial market be developed to help manage the problem?
- Would a commercial harvest solve the problem if it turns out other factors are the root cause?
- Might the relatively new 'Shark Encounter' dive operations be contributing? Many have witnessed similar responses in the Bahamas where feeding sharks occurs.
- Are fishing vessels contributing/causing the problem?
- Has a lack of cold winters contributed to or caused the problem?
- Are other regions having similar experiences?

Reports suggest something has increased encounters with bull and sandbar sharks in our region. The problem is having a negative impact on charter and recreational experiences, and commercial hook & line catches. If an FWC study is warranted to help answer some of these questions in an effort to evaluate and manage the shark problem, please know that the WPBFC is certainly willing to assist.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Tom Twyford, Jr.", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Tom Twyford, Jr.
President

Cc: Pete Schulz, WPBFC Chairman
John Jolley, WPBFC Scientific Advisor
Chester Brewer, SAFMC member & WPBFC board member
Roy Crabtree, Ph.D., Regional Administrator, NOAA Fisheries Service, S.E. Regional Office