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Rethinking Tournaments Where Sharks Always Lose



MONTAUK, N.Y. — This seaside community is increasingly getting attention as a trendy summer playground for the wealthy, but for decades it has been known for something else entirely: killing sharks.

The shark-fishing craze started here in the 1970s with a colorful push from a local angler, [Frank Mundus](#), who popularized what he called “Monster Fishing” and who was a model for the grizzled shark hunter, Quint, in “Jaws.”

Today the piers are decorated with tails and dorsal fins of the sharks that swim these parts: threshers, makos, blues and the occasional great whites. The collection is replenished by the annual tournaments that offer pots of hundreds of thousands of dollars for the biggest sharks. The winning beast is hung by its

tail, like a toothy testimony to man's fear conquered.

Every now and then environmentalists would show up, carrying signs warning about the global decline of shark populations from overfishing and calling for an end to the slaughter. They were mostly ignored in a place where bumper stickers declare that the National Marine Fisheries Service, which regulates fishing hauls, has been "Destroying Fishermen and Their Communities Since 1976."

But times change. And this summer, an artist, April Gornik, and an environmental group, Concerned Citizens of Montauk, led a successful effort to persuade some of the most prominent shark fishermen to try something new, and they hope, lasting: a contest where not a single shark is killed.

Instead, all of the sharks caught in [the contest](#), being held this weekend, will be photographed and released where they are caught. Fishermen will be asked to use circle hooks, believed to inflict less damage on the fish. And they will be asked to help scientific study by attaching tracking tags to select sharks before they are let go. The winner, determined based on a point system, will receive a painting by [Ms. Gornik](#) and \$6,000.

It is enough to make some of the old fishermen here wonder what is happening to the world. They lament that their friends are letting the environmentalists get to them, and predict that a shark contest without a winning carcass on the dock will not be viewed as a shark contest at all by the hundreds who still come for them.

"People want to see sharks," Jack Passie, the captain of the charter boat Windy, which ties off at the Star Island Yacht Club, declared emphatically.

But for those who agree to participate — among them the musician Jimmy Buffett, organizers say — it is a chance for Montauk to lead the way once again, this time to help preserve

the shark population.

“Fishermen of Montauk are aware of one thing: The shark fishery is probably going to come to an end down the road,” said Carl Darenberg, the owner of the Montauk Marine Basin, which held one of the first shark-hunting contests in the country 43 years ago and will host the catch-and-release contest. “If you want to have fish around to catch in the future, you have to make adjustments.”

As a fourth-generation Montauk fisherman, Mr. Darenberg, 63, has extra credibility. His great-grandmother came here soon after emigrating from Sweden, having married the local lighthouse keeper. He has been around long enough to remember Mr. Mundus before he was legend.

“He wanted to learn more about how sharks tick,” Mr. Darenberg said one recent afternoon at his bait shop. “And he sat there and caught them and caught them and caught them when everybody else was out catching swordfish and marlin.”

The technique was simple enough: dump containers of chum into the water and wait for the sharks to be drawn by the wafting odor of blood. Mr. Mundus made a great show of it all the same, playing off the persistent shark phobia. Charging up to \$1,800 a day, he would take his passengers — among them the “Jaws” author Peter Benchley — on his “Monster Fishing” expeditions.

His weapon of choice was not a rod and reel but a harpoon attached to a series of floating barrels to wear the fish down. Some saw his techniques as silly, but the results were as plain as the 4,500-pound great white he brought to the piers in the summer of '64.

This niche pursuit took off in the 1970s because of two unrelated developments. The swordfish, marlin and tuna pursued by most sport fishermen became increasingly scarce, and the director Steven Spielberg turned Mr. Benchley's book into a hit movie.

“‘Jaws’ changed the world,” said Michael Potts, a second-generation Montauk fisherman and the captain of the Blue Fin IV.

The town was besieged with aspiring shark hunters, and their appetite was equal to that of their prey. The carcasses piled up.

“The more sharks you threw on the dock, the better the day you had,” Mr. Potts, who is helping the catch-and-release tournament organizers, said during an interview at a harbor restaurant. “Nobody questioned it for years.”

The local marinas, led by the Montauk Marine Basin, capitalized on the interest by presenting shark-fishing contests, which brought more tourists, more money, and, eventually, environmentalists. “The greenies were flying a plane over — ‘Save the Sharks,’ you know?” said Barry Kohlus, who has fished here for 52 years.

Mr. Kohlus is among those who point out that many marine biologists say the real culprits for diminished shark populations are demand in Asia for shark-fin soup and commercial boats’ use of lines that are miles long and snag sharks in huge numbers, intended or not. Federal rules limit recreational shark catches to one per boat per trip anyway, he said.

“You can’t wipe out a species with a rod and reel — it’s not happening,” he said.

But other anglers had developed some doubts over the years, citing large sharks that were later found to be pregnant and a shift in attitudes about killing sharks — many of which are not very palatable — for sport.

Even Mr. Mundus grew concerned. Before he [died at 82 in 2008](#) he called for gentler treatment and more study of sharks, warning that many were being released to their deaths because hooks used to catch them caused serious injuries. He became an

advocate for circle hooks.

His concern caught the eye of Ms. Gornik, the artist, who had joined protesters against a shark tournament a few years ago and realized their effort just alienated the fishermen. “That mode of approach was so polarizing that no one from the fishing community was going to talk about anything in between,” she said.

She teamed with Rav Freidel, an environmentalist and a director of the Concerned Citizens of Montauk. A recreational fisherman with strong ties to the fishing community, Mr. Freidel had been fed up with “seeing Dumpsters filled with dead sharks.”

Switching tactics, Ms. Gornik and Mr. Freidel began promoting circle hooks, buying them by the thousands to distribute at the docks. It did not go well at first; the hooks they handed out were too small for East Coast shark fishing, reinforcing some captains’ wariness about their use.

But, after adjusting the giveaways to the correct size — they say they eventually handed out at least 30,000 — they raised their goal, and persuaded Mr. Darenberg to hold a circle-hook-only, catch-and-release-only tournament, called [“Shark’s Eye.”](#) Noting that other conservation efforts have helped bring back the striped bass and porgie populations, they say they hope catch-and-release will do the same for sharks.

“It’s about getting sustainable fisheries,” Mr. Freidel said. “Once the fishery is sustainable, hang the fish — I don’t care.”