

the Atlantic

Letting Sharks Off the Hook

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Keith Bedford/Reuters

Discovery Channel's Shark Week, usually the primary excuse for shark-related news content each year, has been upstaged.

Last week, Elliot Sudal became an overnight celebrity after spending 45 minutes wrestling a shark out of the water and onto the beach in Nantucket. Sudal's stunt drew some criticism from activists who argue that the 200-pound sand shark he wrestled faced a reduced chance of survival after the encounter. But in the context of traditional shark-human interaction, and particularly of other shark-human contests being debated this summer, the video actually conveyed something positive: that a shark fight can be entertaining even if both parties come out alive.

Sudal is an experienced fisherman and a conservationist; he has a degree in environmental science and biology, and he's not interested in eating or killing sharks -- he just likes wrestling with them. "Especially

the big ones, the big females, those are the ones you want to keep alive," he says, because the largest sharks are often females at the height of their reproductive capacity. Sharks don't even taste that good, says Sudal, who once tried a black tip shark in Florida, where he does most of his fishing. "I could just go and catch a striped bass, which is much more delicious." He enjoys catching sharks because "it's like the pinnacle of big game fishing. It's an intense, exciting battle, and it's cool to see the sharks and see what's out there. I've been fishing all my life and there's a lot of work that goes into it and a whole culture behind it that I enjoy."

"Obviously," he says, "it's not the best thing in the world for a shark, but, I let 'em go, I try to be as careful as possible, I only have them out of the water for thirty seconds to a minute. I mean, they're sharks - they're pretty tough! Even NOAA has a shark tagging program that emphasizes catch and release. I feel like catch-and-release shark fishing isn't the worst thing ever."

"Catch and release," in fact, is a hot topic in shark sport these days, which previously has been much bloodier than Sudal's one-man match.

The sport of shark fishing has its roots in Montauk, where charter-boat captain Frank Mundus harpooned great whites in the 1950s, coined the term "monster fishing," and reportedly inspired the character Quint in Peter Benchley's *Jaws*. In the decades since, Montauk has been a hub for traditional shark fishing tournaments that draw crowds of anglers and spectators. Finding the sharks in the ocean isn't the crux of this sport. It's fairly easy to attract sharks from late May to July in the Northeast by chumming. The fun, according to enthusiasts, comes from hauling a shark in once hooked -- an affair that can last over an hour. The competitions offer cash prizes, by the pound, to those who bring in the biggest fishes -- typically 300-plus-pound Mako and Thresher sharks. Historically, the only way the general public has been able to take part in these events is by ogling at the sharks that get strung up and weighed onshore at the end of the day.

At this year's Monster Shark event, hosted by the Boston Big Game Fishing Club in Oak Bluffs, a total of just twelve individual sharks were "taken," or killed. Tournament director and BBGFC President Steve James proudly emphasizes his strict minimum size requirements that fishermen must follow as they choose which sharks to throw back in the ocean or bring back to shore to weigh in. According to the BBGFC website, 97-98% of sharks caught during the tournament are released alive.

But though the tournament's impact on the local shark population would seem, from these numbers, to be fairly small, the opposition among the townspeople of Oak Bluffs is significant. Six months ago residents petitioned for the Monster Shark Tournament to either go "all catch and release" or get off the island. Animal rights activists have been showing up at this event for years in protest of, in the words of Vineyard resident Sally Apy, "a disgusting spectacle that is clearly so corrupt in so many ways."

Part of the reason for the opposition, though, comes from what happens to the sharks after release, according to Apy. Because the fishing occurs with various types of tackle, including j-hooks that tear into shark tails, throats and stomachs, post-release mortality is a given for at least a fraction of the sharks. A NOAA-sponsored study published in 2010 -- one of the few available on this topic -- found roughly 26% post-release mortality rates for Threshers hooked by the tail. Even hookless wrestling like Sudal's can be harmful, because sharks have difficulty breathing when being dragged backwards.

Some tournaments, such as the 31-year-old Ocean City Shark Tournament in Maryland, have started requiring fishermen to use only circle hooks, which embed in shark jaws and are thought to increase a shark's chances for post-release survival. James refuses to make his fishermen use circle hooks, insisting that there is no research to back up the idea of lower post-release mortality rates associated with circle hooks. "It's not that I'm against circle hooks, not at all. I use them all the time on my boat when I fish for

Bluefin tuna. I handed them out at my tournament - everyone got at least ten circle hooks. But at the end of the day, it's not clear that the circle hook is doing a whole lot."

James has been in this business for over thirty years, and says he cares deeply about fisheries management. He sits on numerous state and federal committees where he works alongside respected marine biologists and policymakers. But he has not, so far, been open to what other scientists say is a legitimate problem with his signature event.

The problem with the tournament, says Sharon Young, Marine Issues Coordinator for the Humane Society, "is not so much the carnage, but the messaging behind what they're doing." Dr. Bob Hueter, a shark biologist at Mote Marine Laboratory, echoes Young: "I am against kill tournaments because they send a particular message, and it's a message that sharks don't need right now." There was a time, decades ago, when Hueter would participate in research and data collection at kill tournaments, but he says that such practices are not necessary today, and he believes that tagging and tracking live sharks is more valuable than collecting samples from dead ones. He is not against commercial or recreational shark fishing, though, provided there are certain regulations in place -- in other words, he is not out to protect the life of every individual shark. Few opponents of "kill tournaments," as they call non-catch-and-release events, believe that it is simply wrong to kill an individual shark. What troubles these advocates -- or "the people with feelings," as James calls them -- is the cavalier spirit of kill tournaments. They may be small in scale, says Hueter, but because they are so public and high-profile, they can undermine the work of conservationists who have labored for years to raise awareness and combat public perception of sharks. Although the fishermen involved in kill tournaments are quick to point out that they care about conservation, too -- after all, there would be no sport fishing without sustained populations of the target species -- the message is easily obscured among the gory visuals of flesh and blood on the docks at kill tournaments. In previous years, the tournament has been broadcast on ESPN.



A Carcass on the docks at a shark tournament in Montauk in 2007. (Keith Bedford/Reuters)

James gives out prizes for three species of shark: the Mako, Thresher, and Porbeagle. An article in the Vineyard Gazette last week generated comments like one from Christine Powers of Waltham, MA, who calls the event "the Gallows on the Harbor spectacle." Wrote Powers: "A harmless 20-year-old Porbeagle shark has died in the prime of her life. Hopefully, next year's tournament, if it returns, will be strictly catch and release. A few years ago, while returning to our vacation rental from an early dinner at the Ocean View, we happened upon the gory weigh-in and turned away in disgust."

James says such talk is overblown. "We hang them up, we weigh them, and if the crew wants to take pictures of 'em, great," he says, when asked about local opposition. "But the idea that they're hanging or being displayed on every pylon in town -- I know the way the animal activists like to twist that. The truth is we put the fish up on the gallows, get a weight on it, then we shut the scale down. Generally speaking the crew jumps out, takes some pictures. The crowd likes to take a picture of the fish hanging up in the air so they got some perspective [with regards to its size] with the people around it, then we put it on a cutting board, the marine biologists go at it, they do a stomach content and a necropsy and then my guys take over, skin it, head it, and then chop it into wheels and pass it back to the guys so they can get it in their cooler."

By the way, he adds, "The Porbeagle shark, the Mako and the Thresher are all outstanding fish to eat. In fact if you just take inch-thick pieces and you slap 'em on the grill, they taste and resemble very much like swordfish."

But Young, at the Humane Society, says that aside from the concerns of those who don't like the gore, there's a serious conservation concern that's getting overlooked. "Every year at the international conference on international trade in endangered species, the U.S. co-sponsors a measure to ban international trade of Porbeagles -- and these guys," she says, talking of the competition organizers, "are giving prizes for them." The Mako sharks are in a similar position, according to Young, because the current fisheries management plan for Makos in the U.S. "asks fishermen to voluntarily release all caught Mako sharks alive, and yet again, they're offering prizes to kill them here." The message these organizers are sending is that, if they're not officially listed as endangered, they don't count, and "'The idea that you get to see these animals is what's really important. The fact that they're dead shouldn't bother you.' To me, it harkens back to the days when you had trophy hunters go marching out in Africa and come back with elephants. We don't do that stuff anymore. We understand that there are fragile species."

Young also thinks there's some species prejudice going on. "We don't do this for whales, we don't do this for elephants, we don't do this for tigers -- but yet, because this is a fish, it doesn't matter?"

Sean and Brooks Paxton -- the "Shark Brothers" -- have been working with Hueter and the Guy Harvey Ocean Foundation in Florida for many years to encourage catch-and-release as a best practice in sport fishing. Their first major event was the Guy Harvey Ultimate Shark Challenge and Festival, which featured satellite tagging for research purposes, the mandatory use of circle hooks, and live streaming from boats to shore.

The Paxton brothers have consulted with tournament organizers all over the world to help them create entertaining and money-making all-catch-and-release events, including the Shark's Eye tournament at Montauk Marine Basin this coming weekend. "We think this event is an important point on a timeline in the evolution of recreational shark fishing. Montauk is, after all, the birthplace of this sport," says Sean. Brooks adds, "We've consulted with tournaments from South America to Florida to Ocean City, Maryland, but since this is Montauk, where it all started, this event proves that shark-release fishing is definitely catching on in an even bigger way."

The tournament is largely sponsored by the Guy Harvey Ocean Foundation and has strong support in the community. An environmental group, Concerned Citizens of Montauk, and New York-based artist April

Gornik lobbied for it, and many charter boat captains in the area have said they've been looking for something like this for a long time.

According to Montauk Marine Basin owner Carl Darenberg, this isn't the first no-kill tournament ever held in Montauk (there was one in 2006), but it is the first no-kill tournament in which all sharks will be tagged with satellite-based tracking devices. And, of course, circle hooks will be mandatory. Tagged sharks will be named by the anglers who catch them, and anyone will be able to track the sharks online via the OCEARCH Global Shark Tracker. "We're trying to show fishermen that you can go out and have fun and not have to bring something in," says Darenberg, who expects Shark's Eye to be a Montauk fixture "for years to come... it's going to grow and grow and grow."

Those who support the shift to all-catch-and-release fishing tournaments say, aside from the benefit to shark populations, it's simply more satisfying to watch a shark swim away after being caught than it is to watch its carcass hang upside down on land. Wendy Benchley, whose late husband Peter gained fame for writing *Jaws* (and, years later, expressed dismay over the unintended consequences the story had on sharks), says, "I think these catch-and-release tournaments are much more exciting, especially if you have live stream video." With today's technology, audiences on shore can watch the anglers "bring the sharks alongside the boat, and wrestle with them, and wrangle them to figure out how long they are. And then to watch everybody cheer on the boat and on shore as the shark goes off to patrol the seas for another day is really exhilarating."

Back at Martha's Vineyard, James, who ran a few all-catch-and-release tournaments of his own in the 1990s, scoffs at the idea of taking advice from someone who, he says, "lives on the blood money from *Jaws*," and is extremely skeptical about the viability of a purely catch-and-release tournament. "Oh my God, it's gonna be a disaster for them," he says of Shark's Eye. "It all sounds great, but good luck. Good luck. Do you want to come down and watch a catch and release tournament? It's a little like going to the submarine races! ... There's nothing to watch - unless you've got a live television feed, but who's gonna pay for that equipment?"

There won't be live streaming at Shark's Eye this weekend, but the Paxton's are confident in the event's success even without it. "Just because you may not be able to do live streaming, -- that's an expensive proposition -- there are other ways. First you've got to get anglers on board," says Sean. There are two components to the more traditional competitions: prize money for the anglers and the public involvement back on the dock with the weigh-in. "So we started looking for ways to replace those elements, you know make sure there was good prize incentive there, and bring in media attention, and then bring the science in." They think they've "crack[ed] the code," as Sean puts it. "It used to be that you would bring your catch back and it would hang there dead for a few minutes and people would take pictures and that was it. Then it was over. Now, they can satellite tag a shark and this shark can go on for the six to eighteen months or however long the satellite is programmed for and they can brag, 'Look, that's my shark that I tagged in Montauk in the North Atlantic and now it's down in Florida.' It's a cultural shift in the way we are thinking about this resource."

Wendy Benchley agrees. "We want them to survive, to keep a balance in the ocean - and that's the message you get from a catch and release tournament, but not from kill tournaments." She now works with the non-profit organization Shark Savers and is an Environmental Defense Fund trustee, and says, "I am thrilled that Montauk and hopefully Martha's Vineyard are going to catch-and-release. It's taken too long."

Whether the Martha's Vineyard tournament changes format remains to be seen. Due to opposition from Oak Bluffs residents, James plans to move the Monster Shark event to Newport, Rhode Island next year, and hopes to run another kill tournament in New Bedford, Massachusetts, but says he will also "run some form of the tournament in Oak Bluffs next year."

"I'll leave it up to the selectmen in terms of what they want to do," he says, referring to the non-binding referendum that the town of Oak Bluffs passed recently demanding a change in the tournament's format. "It's hard to believe that the town would want to go down the path of all-release, but," he says with a laugh, he's happy to release the sharks right in the harbor if that's really what they want. "We talked about putting up a zip line over the harbor and you can drag your feet [above the sharks]!"

It isn't a joke the anti-kill activists appreciate. Only time will tell whether catch-and-release will continue to gain traction, but Sudal's viral shark-wrestling video suggests deathless contests can still entertain, and organizers in Montauk are optimistic. "People seem to love their sharks no matter what," says Sean Paxton. "What we're seeing now, though, is that they love their sharks more alive than dead."

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