

# Lone shark

■ Chris van Gass

**PLETTENBERG BAY** - Plettenberg Bay Shark Spotters have recorded seeing only one great white shark so far this year - on 23 March.

This emerged from a presentation at last weekend's Plett Ocean Festival and Marine Science Symposium held at the Beacon Island hotel, where knowledge and expertise of all things ocean were shared.

Sharks are always top of the science menu and their prevalence, or not, took the spotlight again with indications that the pinnacle predator, the great white, seems to have been replaced (in numbers) by bronze whaler sharks.

Melissa Nel, programme manager for research at Plett Shark Spotters, told the symposium that in January this year seven bronze whalers were spotted, followed by 12 in February.

In March a total of 25 sharks were spotted - one great white, 18 bronze whalers and six hammer head sharks.

There were no sightings in April, possibly due to bad weather in the area, and in May there were 35 sightings, mainly of bronze whalers.

The *Daily Maverick* reported that in May this year a 4,6m great white washed up in Chintsa Bay in the Eastern Cape, with its liver ripped out, a common feeding pattern of orcas.

## Orca predation

In the article Dr Alison Towner, a shark scientist from Rhodes University who has studied the impact of orca predation on white shark behaviour and distribution, linked the dramatic decline of great whites in the Gansbaai area to the presence of orcas.

Towner said the killer whales preyed on great whites, feeding on their nutritious livers.

Whenever orcas were around, great whites seemed to leave.

The article was based on four peer reviewed scientific papers analysing and debating on the best available evidence on white sharks and orcas, said Towner.

"It supported the point that a cohort of white sharks moved East because of orca predation," Towner said in response to questions put to her by the *Knysna-Plett Herald*.

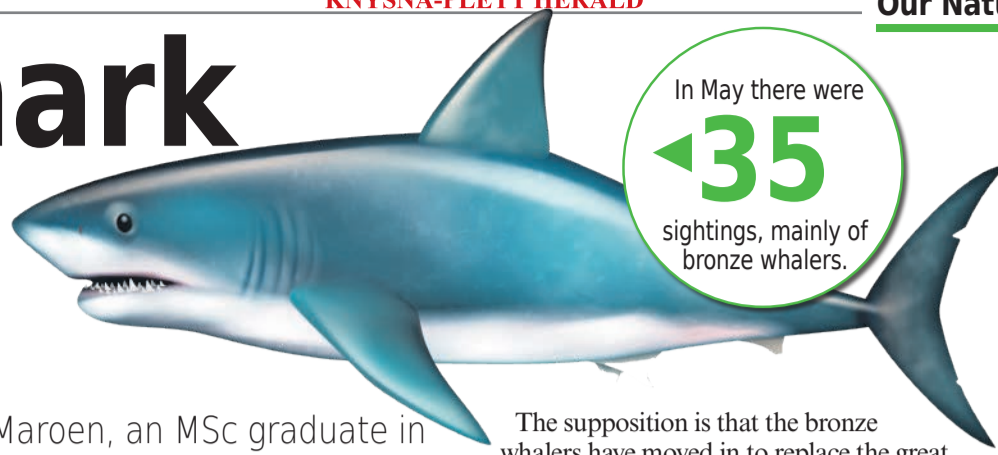
"We cannot broad-brush and say bronze sharks are replacing white sharks, however in Gansbaai and then False Bay cage dive operators did start to see them appear in the absence of white sharks," Towner told the *Knysna-Plett Herald*.

"In fact the False Bay operators had their coordinates to anchor extended closer to shore to work with the species through the year. The bronzies have not shown the same pattern at the operators in Mossel Bay, however."

Ed Stoddard, in the *Daily Maverick* article, highlighted the recent foraging by orcas on great whites along the Eastern Cape coast, having moved up from the Western Cape coast between 2017 and now.

## Port and Starboard

Towner told the *Knysna-Plett Herald* that as far as Plettenberg Bay was concerned, Port and Starboard - as they have been named - and other killer whales have routinely returned to the location over the past few years, "and preyed on at least one bronze whaler shark and quite possibly white sharks, although we have not observed it there yet".



In May there were **35** sightings, mainly of bronze whalers.

Maroen, an MSc graduate in zoology from Stellenbosch University, is continuing with photo ID monitoring of bronze whaler sharks using Identifin software to make the identification of individuals more accurate.



"Similar to False Bay, Gansbaai, Mossel Bay and now Chintsa, the white sharks have most likely been displaced, meaning they become less in number, then absent over the course of a few repeat orca predations/visits over extended time periods (ie: years).

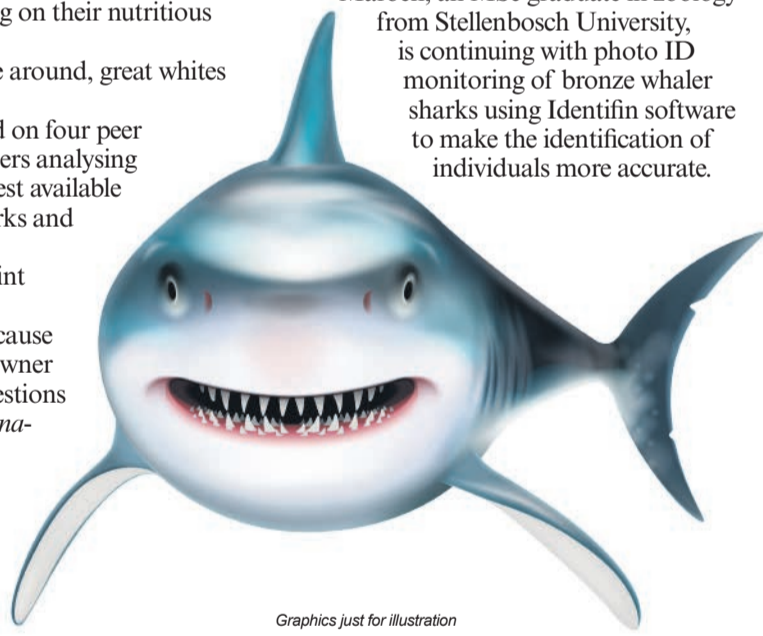
"We addressed it in our paper "Fear at the Top" in the *African Journal of Marine Science*."

The story of the dwindling sightings of great whites in Gansbaai was also highlighted by shark identification expert at the Plett Ocean Festival, Megan Maroen, of the White Shark Diving Company.

She told the symposium when people came to Gansbaai for its famous shark-diving experience, they are not guaranteed the sighting of a great white (as was the case some years ago) and are now told they "might" see "a shark" on an excursion.

## ID monitoring

Maroen, an MSc graduate in zoology from Stellenbosch University, is continuing with photo ID monitoring of bronze whaler sharks using Identifin software to make the identification of individuals more accurate.



Graphics just for illustration

The supposition is that the bronze whalers have moved in to replace the great whites as a pinnacle predator.

In Plettenberg Bay, since the introduction of Shark Spotters following two shark attack fatalities in 2022, things have normalised.

When Shark Spotters sight a shark - in the case of a great white, bathers are told to stay out of the water for an hour afterwards. In the event of a bronze whaler shark sighting, this time is reduced to half-an-hour.

Other benefits the Shark Spotters have is to supplement science, by recording their sightings. They have also assisted in preventing a drowning after swiftly alerting lifesavers to an impending potential drowning emergency.

Plett Shark Spotters' Nel says she has prepared a media release, which is in her in her desk drawer, in case the great whites return to Plettenberg Bay, as was the case in previous years.



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## ECO-ROUTE ENVIRONMENTAL CONSULTANCY EIA PROCESS



### Notification of Public Participation: Proposed Stabilisation of a Portion of The Keurbooms River Embankment South of the Plettenberg Bay Angling Club, RE 1 of the farm Hanglip No.305, Plettenberg Bay, Bitou Municipality

Notice is hereby provided in terms of the National Environmental Management Act (Act 107 of 1998), the National Environmental Management Act: Environmental Impact Assessment Regulations 2014, as amended, of a 30-day Pre-Application Public Participation Process to be undertaken under the authority of the Department of Environmental Affairs and Development Planning (DEA&DP) reference: 16/3/3/6/7/1/D1/3/0307/23. The Public Participation Process will run from **1 July 2024 - 31 July 2024**.

#### The following EIA Listed Activities are applicable:

- Government Notice No. R327 (Listing Notice 1):** Activity 12 (ii) (a) Activity 17 (ii) (c) (d) (e) Activity 19A (ii)
- Government Notice No. R324 (Listing Notice 3):** Activity 14 (ii) (a) (ff) (hh) Activity 26 (i)

A Pre-Application Basic Assessment Report and relevant appendices will be sent via email to all registered Interested and Affected Parties/ I&APs for public review and comment. Alternatively, all relevant documents may be accessed via our website during the public participation period.

Should you wish to gain further information regarding the project or wish to register as an Interested and Affected Party please contact the Environmental Assessment Practitioner (details below).

Please provide written comments with your name, contact details and an indication of any direct business, financial, personal, or other interest which you may have in the development.

**Environmental Assessment Practitioner:**  
Samantha Teeluckdhari (EAPASA Reg 2023/6443)

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