



## North Shore shark tours OK, study finds

UH marine researchers conclude that there is no danger to the public

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Because of remoteness of North Shore shark encounter tours and other conditioning factors, researchers say the tours do not pose a threat to public safety.

The team, including four researchers from the University of Hawaii's Institute of Marine Biology, said sharks are conditioned to go to areas far offshore where crab fishermen dumped their bait. The team also said the effects of a diesel-powered vessel operating several kilometers offshore appear to trigger a conditioned feeding response from sharks.

The study called also indicated that there were no increase in shark attacks on the North Shore since the inception of the shark tours.

The report is available online in the Environmental Conservation Journal.

Controversy on shark encounter tours reignited after a businessman wanted to operate a shark encounter tour off Maunalua Bay. A community outcry about possible danger to recreational bay users resulted in the businessman nixing his plans to run the operation.

Lead researcher Carl Meyer said the study was focused solely on the North Shore.

Existing shark tours took advantage of sharks that already congregate around crab fishermen who throw old bait into the ocean from their traps.

The fishermen have been doing that since the 1960s, according to the study.

Shark tours operated three miles offshore. Galapagos and sandbar sharks are mostly observed in the area. Researchers indicated that these type of sharks are rarely associated with shark attacks on humans.

"We feel vindicated," said Joe Pavsek, owner of North Shore Shark Adventures, who started the first shark encounter tour in Hawaii.

"We have endured years of unsubstantiated accusations and alarmist propaganda about our shark tours. Now a peer-reviewed scientific study has shown that these wild accusations are simply without merit," said Pavsek in a written statement.

Stefanie Brendl, owner of Hawaii Shark Encounters, said she understands people's fear of sharks with movies like "Jaws" that perceive sharks as human-eating animals.

"It's a natural fear, but we can't base our decisions on fear and paranoia. That never works out," said Brendl. She echoed the researchers findings that Galapagos and sandbar sharks do not prey on humans. Brendl also noted that the sharks do not follow tour boats toward the shore.

But state Rep. Gene Ward (R, Kalama Valley-Hawaii Kai), who had yet to read the study, said, "One single study is not convincing. If there is public endangerment, we as public officials have to err on the side of caution."

A shark task force was created to draft legislation to ban shark tours in Hawaii and facilitate enforcement. The task force plans to present the bill to lawmakers next year.

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