

THE TRUTH ABOUT HAWAIIAN SHARKS

One beautiful sunny summer day, over 100 years ago, a young girl went down to the beach by Spouting Horn on the south shore of Kaua`i to collect opihi. This story was given to me by a very special Hawaiian lady in Poipu and it was typed with one of the first typewriters in Hawai`i. The story was told by Mrs. Elizabeth K. Medeiros of Kalaheo; Great-Great Grandmother of Haalou (the spelling and punctuation are transcribed from the original document).

When I was a girl my father was a cow-boy. He would bring home tripe from where he worked and my mother would clean it. We would carry it by bucketfuls to the place where we fished. My father would feed it to the fish (he did not tell us what kind of fish he was feeding). We used to ask, "Why do you feed good food to the fish?" He said, "We MUST feed the fish."

In a cave by Nomilo fish pond lived a very old shark. This was our family shark god (aumakua). My father fed the shark every time we went fishing. If the old shark did not come up for food then the men would dive down and take food to the shark! He never hurt the Hawaiians that fed him. He was friendly to us and he would guide the people in their canoes where-ever they needed to go.

One day some boys and girls were picking 'Opihi by Spouting Horn. They grow big there. Now my mother and father always told us, "Never turn your okole (backside) to the ocean. Always watch the waves." But I turned my face to the mountain and bent over to pick an 'opihi. One big wave pushed me off the rocks and carries me far out into the water. When I came to my senses it seemed as if I was standing on rocks with seaweed all around. It seemed like the land was coming to me. I saw my sisters and friends and called, "Come and get me, come help me!"

They motioned and pointed at my clothing. As I looked down at myself, I saw that my dress was all torn but I called again. "Come and get me. Please bring me clothes." It still seemed as if the land was coming to me. When I got to land my sister gave me her muu muu.

We did not tell our parents because we knew they had warned us, "never have the 'okole facing the ocean." Some time later, when some neighbors and friends came to our house to get fruit and vegetables, we were sitting under the mango tree eating mangoes. My mother was inside the window and peeping out. My sister was telling about my falling in the ocean and my mother heard.

Later when she questioned us we did not wish to tell, but she kept asking, "Who fell in? Tell me! Who was it?"

So - she came to know and she explained to us how I reached land again. We had always been taught when fishing or picking limu (seaweed) to always pray first to heaven then pray to the ocean. When I thought I was standing on rocks and seaweed and it seemed the land was coming to me I knew that the shark god had helped me.

The end.

As a marine biologist in 2007 that has studied sharks and all the ocean creatures for 40 years, I pray to the ocean spirits every time I drop down with my SCUBA gear into the middle of a school of sharks. Good science and the belief that sharks are good and not man eaters, has allowed me to have many wonderful face-to-face shark encounters. I hope I can show you that these creatures are not normally dangerous to people and are extremely important to our ocean environment. My aumakua (ancestral spirit) is a shark, and Hawaiians for thousands of years knew how to connect with sharks as they understood that they were our protectors, not man eaters.

“Jaws”, the movie, literally ruined hundreds of years of science and education about sharks! I hope to re-educate the public on the “truth about sharks” and with the help of the Save Our Seas (www.saveourseas.org) I will give talks to all our schools so the children will have the proper education about sharks and all of the ocean creatures. Over the past ten years I have dove with many bull sharks, reef sharks, tiger sharks and even great whites; and I have never been in a shark cage! I have been with divers where we dumped 50 lbs of fish guts and blood all around us and had several large bull sharks come in and gently feed without bothering us. If sharks wanted to eat people I would not be sitting at my computer right now writing this article!

In Hawai'i tiger sharks eat lobster, fish, sea turtles and other dead or sick animals. A large tiger shark may come into the surf chasing a sea turtle. The turtle may do an evasive maneuver, and a surfer ends up in the path of the oncoming shark. The shark may accidentally bite the surfer thinking it is the turtle. This is very rare but it sometimes happens, much like being hit by a drunk driver who swerves into your lane head on. More surfers get hurt by hitting their surfboard than any altercation with a shark. In December 2004 I did a series of SCUBA dives at Makua (Tunnels) Reef on the north shore of Kauai, where a young female surfer recently had her arm bitten off by a large shark. The reef below where she was surfing drops sharply from five feet to over fifty feet deep. The reef is filled with room size caves that connect and twist through the lava rock. This spot is called “Tunnels Reef” because it is an old submerged volcano that is filled with lava tubes. These caves are so large and dark that you need a dive light to see during the day to find your way through them. Lobsters that are usually active at night are walking around mid day in the caves. Many sea turtles venture into the caves to sleep; in one cave I sat watching three turtles, five large white tipped reef sharks and a dozen lobsters all just hanging out together! It is quite a unique place to SCUBA dive. Large tiger sharks often cruise through the caves looking for a meal. I was going from one large cave through a small opening to another cave, when a large tiger shark was going in the opposite direction. At first I wasn't sure what I was looking at as I was looking directly into a rack of shiny teeth! I am only human, and my heart started pounding. Just then, I thought maybe this dive was not a good idea since the only one who knew where I was, was the dive shop owner in Kapa'a who rented me the tanks and told me it wasn't a good idea to dive at Tunnels Reef in the winter! The tiger shark just looked at me with his beady little eyes and passed by, not caring a bit about my presence in his domain. As I left the cave I looked up and saw the bottom of a surfboard cruising by on a nice wave, 50 feet above me. I have surfed Makua many times and I knew this surfer was ready to

tuck into a nice barrel right above me while I was SCUBA diving, and a large tiger shark looking for lunch!

Sharks have electromagnetic sensors under their snout that can pick up vibrations in the water up to a mile away! They can tell the difference between a human heartbeat and that of a fish, turtle, or seal. They can tell the difference between human blood and fish blood. When a surfer cuts his foot on the reef and bleeds in the water, the sharks know it, but they do not always respond. If a fish is wounded and bleeding the sharks respond immediately looking for an easy meal. Sharks are the vultures of the ocean and they usually eat the old, sick, or wounded sea creatures. If they were not around the beach would be littered with dead stinky animals!

One day at Poipu on the south shore of Kaua`i I went spear fishing after surfing right outside a popular surf spot. I was on my way back up to the surface with a nice snapper (to`au) on my three pronged sling. Out of nowhere a six foot white tipped reef shark zoomed by and stole my fish off my spear! I was a bit stunned, and then I started laughing. The shark had responded to the distress signals put out by the wounded fish. He wasn't trying to bother me as he was looking for an easy meal. I have been back to that spot spear fishing many times and each time I go, the white tip shows up as soon as I spear a fish. We have now developed a routine where I give him one fish then I keep the next one for myself. Of course I feed him chubs (nenu) and keep the best fish for my dinner. Occasionally the shark tries to take my fish after I have already given him one and I just growl at him! He usually goes away and hides for a short while but returns soon as if nothing had happened!

Sharks in Hawai`i are not that dangerous, but there is a true man eater in the islands! I often bring one along when I give school lectures, and keep it in my dive bag so the students cannot see it. I pull it out with my gloved hand in front of the students, but only after I have given my spear to someone in the front row so they can protect us if it gets away! I have even had teachers move to the back of the class and hide behind their students. They all get a good laugh when I pull the "man eater" out of the bag and they see it is just a coconut! In a ten year period less than five people died in Hawai`i by being accidentally bitten by a shark, but in the same time period over 50 people were killed by falling coconuts! I often tell tourists when in Hawai`i to run from the killer coconut trees and jump in the water with the sharks where it is safe! In the entire world only five people on average die from shark bites but over 1,000 die from bee stings and dog maulings!

When I am out surfing or diving I realize just how slow and cumbersome I am compared to a parrotfish (uhu), sea turtle (honu) or even a goofy looking 7-11 crab (`alakuma). Any large shark could catch and eat me any time it wanted. I am thankful that I am not on the shark's dinner menu. Occasionally, like with all outdoor sports, people get hurt by sharks but it is so rare that it really doesn't demand much of our attention. My job is to dispel the myths about sharks that were created by stupid movies like "Jaws" and to help bring back the wonderful relationship the Hawaiians in the past had with these special creatures. A shark may have led the original travelers to these beautiful islands which give us so much

mana (spiritual power). Nowhere in my travels have I seen people more connected to the ocean and all of its creatures than in Hawai'i. We need to give back to the sea and support groups like Save Our Seas (www.saveourseas.org) so I can continue my work and help teach our children the truth about Hawaiian sharks. My father loved sharks and he learned to surf from "The Duke" himself. He told me one day out surfing "What it is to die but to stand naked in the wind while surfing, and melt into the sun". He also told me that when you die you should have given back to nature more than you took. My father was a wise man and it is time for all of us to give back to the sea that has given us so much life and enjoyment.

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