

THE MANY FACES OF
JOHN GIELGUD PAGE 4

Monday A gift of life, in Self

Is this the summer of sharks?



Photo: Superstock

For a time in the 90s, Hong Kong was one of the most unsafe places in the world for shark attacks. With three unconfirmed sightings in May, could we be heading for another season of fear? *Kenneth Howe* reports

AFTER THREE UNCONFIRMED sightings of up to 10 primordial predators in Deep Water Bay recently, a city's collective fear of sharks has been resurrected. Sunday junk cruise parties are making excuses not to swim. Cocktail conversation recollects Australian shark hunter Vic Hislop's unintentionally comic attempt at hunting local man-eaters in the mid-1990s. Even surfers are hesitant about tempting fate.

Is it going to be a shark summer? Hong Kong sharks have an exceedingly high kill rate, wreaking unwitting revenge on a city whose insatiable appetite for shark's fin soup is leading to the species' demise. Since 1991, all six confirmed attacks by sharks on humans were fatal, compared with a global statistical average of 15 per cent, according to the International Shark Attack Files (ISAF). For the decade of the 90s, only Brazil, Australia, South Africa and Reunion Islands, respectively, recorded more deaths, according to the ISAF.

Also Hong Kong sharks are exceptionally prone attacking human victims. Worldwide, Hong Kong rounded out the top 10 in number of attacks by region in the past decade (1990-2000). About 50 people are attacked by sharks annually, says the ISAF whereas in 1995, three people were killed in a fortnight in the waters off Sai Kung alone.

"For a period, Hong Kong was the most unsafe place on the planet for shark attacks," says Keith Wilson, a senior fisheries officer with the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department.

But that doesn't seem to be the case any more, according to marine biologist Andrew Cornish. "Basically, for all intents and purposes, sharks are extinct in Hong Kong," he says. In the course of 1,000 dives over five years in researching a book he co-authored, *Reef Fish Of Hong Kong*, Cornish says he's seen only one shark. It was a nurse shark, a small-mouthed, bottom-dwelling, crustacean-eat-

ing, bunny rabbit of a predator spotted in Mirs Bay.

Ultimately, biologists' knowledge of some 350 species of shark is a drop in the ocean, and in Hong Kong, even less so. It doesn't make for much of a doctorate thesis if you can't find anything to study, says Cornish.

What is known, however, is that all local attacks have historically occurred when waters warm up to 24 degrees Celsius or more, a temperature recently reached at local beaches. As of last weekend, many beaches hit 26 degrees, though hotter doesn't mean more shark activity.

The warming precipitates a South China Sea change, a theory put forth by George Burgess, director of the International Shark Attack Files based in Florida, when the Government commissioned him to fly out and study Hong Kong waters in 1995, the year of the last reported shark-attack death.

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Ten years of sightings and attacks



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