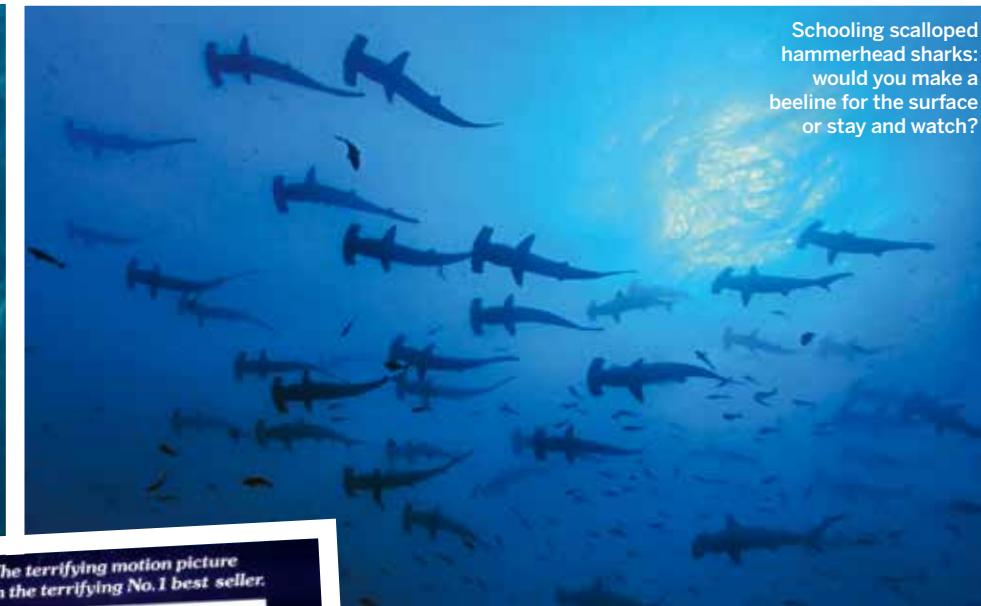




Ragged tooth sharks may look intimidating but are relatively placid. *Deadly 60* presenter Steve Backshall had no qualms when he spent time beside them in a tank at the London Aquarium.



Schooling scalloped hammerhead sharks: would you make a beeline for the surface or stay and watch?



– *Jaws*. But Backshall isn't convinced that you can solely blame the 1975 blockbuster for turning them into the monsters from the deep.

"There's something about that primal terror of being in an alien environment," he says. "We're somewhere we automatically feel vulnerable, and then you've got this massive creature that looks like hell on Earth. It's kind of natural for you to be frightened of it."

Bite-Back's Graham Buckingham agrees. "When I learned to dive, I was anxious. There was this unsaid thing – we'll be in the water with sharks," he recalls. "The dive instructor just said, 'Don't worry

“MORE PEOPLE ARE TERRIFIED OF SHARKS THAN OF SPIDERS, SNAKES AND RATS COMBINED”

about it,' which I thought was a bit flippant."

In fact, Buckingham gradually realised that shark encounters were very rare, and he began to wonder why he wasn't seeing them more often. It didn't take him long to discover the shark fin trade – in which sharks are caught and often have their fins cut off before being dumped back into the water alive – was taking tens of millions of them every

IT WAS ALWAYS SAFE TO GO IN THE WATER

WHY DO WE PERSEVERE IN THE BELIEF THAT SHARKS ARE TERRIFYING CREATURES THAT ONLY WANT TO RIP US TO PIECES? AND HOW DOES THAT AFFECT THE WAY WE PROTECT AND CONSERVE THEM? JAMES FAIR INVESTIGATES.

The larger sharks are ragged tooth or sand tiger sharks," *Deadly 60* presenter Steve Backshall says, pointing at the 2m-long creatures swimming in lazy circles in front of us. Fine, needle-like teeth sprout from the front of their mouths like a bony pin-cushion. "Those teeth work by trapping fish as if in a cage, and they would never be able to eat a marine mammal such as a seal. The smaller ones are blacktip reef sharks. They're obligate fish-eaters, too. And

then, on the bottom, there are nurse sharks."

We're at the London Aquarium, and Backshall is trying to put my mind at rest because in a few minutes we're going to be putting on masks and wetsuits and getting into the tank with the sharks. But hey – these sharks only eat fish, so I've got nothing to worry about.

Backshall is here representing the shark

conservation charity Bite-Back, which in a public opinion survey carried out towards the end of 2017 found out that more people are terrified of sharks than of spiders, snakes and rodents combined. Nearly two-thirds (64 per cent) of those polled

said they would rather sharks didn't exist.

Bite-Back's founder and only paid member of staff, Graham Buckingham, believes this fear and loathing is one reason why humans, as



Trump has Tweeted his fear of sharks.

a species, continue to slaughter sharks in almost unimaginable numbers – an estimated 100 million a year, according to research published in 2013. Sharks are long-lived and slow maturing and reproducing animals, and such a level of exploitation is unsustainable.

THE JAWS EFFECT

Attempting to get most people in the western world to start feeling sympathy for sharks generally screeches to a halt with the mention of a single word



Steve Backshall is raising awareness of shark conservation. Inset above left: a *Jaws* film poster.

MY FAVOURITE SHARK SPECIES

Three divers share their enthusiasm for sharks.



STEVE BACKSHALL
TV presenter

My favourite shark is the **TASSELLED WOBBOGONG**. They have extraordinary cryptic camouflage, an outline broken up by fringes and tassels, and they lie on the seabed waiting for a fish to come close by and then – bam! – they suck it in. They are very beautiful.



GRAHAM BUCKINGHAM
Bite-Back

My favourite species of shark is the **SILKY**. They're inquisitive, beautifully shark-shaped and, because they're curious, over time they will come to you, and so they've been some of my closest encounters. The time I saw whale sharks in Honduras, I genuinely dreamed about them afterwards. It was an incredibly special encounter.



KATHRYN CURZON
Friends for Sharks

My favourite species of shark is the **PYJAMA SHARK**, simply because they are stripy. But I have swum with them in South Africa, and they are tiny and really nice to be with. I really like bull sharks, too – they're very relaxed.

Ragged tooth shark: Alex Mustard/NPL; Jaws poster: World History Archive/Alamy; Hammerhead sharks: Franco Banni/NPL; Steve Backshall: Bite-Back; Donald Trump: Mandel Ngan/Getty

Tasseled wobbegong: Waterframe/Alamy; Silky shark: Peter Oxford/Kindred/FFA; Pyjama shark: Poelzer/Wolfgang/Alamy

year. This culminated in him wandering into his local Chinese restaurant in Clapham, south London, to ask them why they had shark-fin soup on the menu.

"It was a good conversation, but the manager told me sharks were bad, scary animals, so I took in newspaper cuttings about shark populations to show him there was a problem," Buckingham says. That led him to set up Bite-Back, which engages its membership of about 800 people to persuade restaurants and retailers to stop selling shark products.

PERSUASIVE PUBLIC

Since it was founded in 2004, Bite-Back has persuaded Asda to stop selling 100,000 portions of mako and thresher shark every year, 583 outlets of Holland & Barrett not to stock capsules containing shark cartilage and some 80 restaurants to withdraw shark-fin soup from their menus. "Five years ago, there were 63 restaurants in the UK selling shark-fin soup," he says. "Today there are about 20."

But while most shark fins are consumed in Asian countries, that doesn't exonerate the west, which does a lot of their dirty work. Spain, France, Portugal and the USA are all in the top 20 of shark-fishing nations and Spain takes the third highest tonnage of any country.

HOW TO BE SAFE WITH SHARKS

- Most sharks hunt at dawn and dusk so avoid these times.
- Avoid low visibility water for the same reasons – if a shark mistakes you for its real prey, then you could get bitten.
- If you are diving or swimming unguided, avoid seal colonies at any time of day or year.
- If a shark feels threatened by you being too close, it may arch its back, drop its fins, gape its jaws and swim in a less fluid, more jerky fashion. Instead of swimming in smooth curves, it will turn in angular corners.
- If you are scuba diving and feel threatened by a shark, go to the seabed (if you can). Sharks like to attack from behind, so this cuts down the areas where they can come from.
- Keep eye contact with the shark – if they can see that they've been seen, they are less likely to come and investigate.
- In cases where sharks bite, they do it once and quickly let go



Diving with sharks can be thrilling.

when they realise that a person is not a food source.

- Finally, don't panic – panic may make sharks curious, so don't thrash around.

Tips from Kathryn Curzon of Friends for Sharks.

"There's a single port in Vigo [in Galicia] that's landing 500 blue sharks a day," says Buckingham. "I would say this overarching belief that sharks are bad animals has created a blind spot that allows them to be fished at such a ferocious rate because nobody cares."

Bite-Back's thesis is that by trying to change people's minds and raising awareness of the threat to the ocean's top predators, public opinion will gradually demand a reduction in – and hopefully even a complete end to – current levels of shark exploitation.

Kathryn Curzon started to think

FRANCE, USA, SPAIN AND PORTUGAL ARE ALL IN THE TOP 20 OF SHARK-FISHING NATIONS."

about how she could help after sustaining a back injury in 2014 that stopped her from working as a guide in South Africa's lucrative great white shark cage-diving business. With her now husband, Nick Curzon, she set up Friends for Sharks, with the intention of giving public lectures that would aim to suggest alternative ideas about the true nature of sharks.

During a world tour in 2015 they held 87 events in eight countries to 7,144 people, visiting schools, universities, museums and assorted public groups.

SEEING A SOFTER SIDE

"Rather than specifically saying you shouldn't be scared of sharks, we tell stories about them," Curzon tells me. "We aim to portray them as the gentle, calm, placid creatures they are, and let people realise for themselves they are nothing to be scared of. We believe that by reducing this fear, people will start to care, and that's when conservation happens."

Back at the London Aquarium, it's time for Steve Backshall and me to get into the tank, and at this point I discover that we will actually be confined to a rope 'cage' with a glass bottom from where we watch the sharks going round in circles.

Speaking to Backshall afterwards is perhaps more illuminating. He's had more than 1,000 dives with sharks and says he's never felt nervous or at risk with any of them. All the experts I talk to say the key thing is to respect the sharks as predators.

Backshall says that most of the time sharks are completely ambivalent towards people. "In clear water, when we've had a chance to assess the body language of individual sharks, we've had dozens of dives with great whites and everyone has so far been fine."

So how do you feel about sharks now? And does it make any difference to what you think about the level of exploitation they suffer and how we should go about eliminating it? 🐾

ON THE MENU

63

UK restaurants sold shark fin soup in 2012.

20

UK restaurants sold it in 2017.



73 million sharks are killed every year, mainly for their fins.

Blacktip reef shark: David Fleetman/ANPL; shark finning: Brian Skerry/Getty

➤ FIND OUT MORE

Bite-Back Shark & Marine Conservation: www.bite-back.com; Friends for Sharks: www.friendsforsharks.com; London Aquarium 'Snorkelling with Sharks' experience: <http://bit.ly/2Gizmg1>