

Op-Ed

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Libertarian Party

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SHARK ATTACK!

HAS THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT'S SHARK-PROTECTION PROGRAM CAUSED THE SURGE IN SAVAGE SHARK ATTACKS?

BY STEVE DASBACH (695 WORDS)

Here's some advice for Americans who are shocked, horrified — and perhaps even a bit puzzled — by the recent surge of shark attacks along the East Coast: Don't blame the sharks. Blame the government.

That's right. The government.

Back in 1993, federal employees (with the best of intentions) decided to protect sharks from commercial fishermen. The results have been deadly for humans.

That year, in response to claims by some interest groups that sharks were an endangered species, the federal government began managing the U.S. commercial shark fishery. To increase their number, it shortened the commercial shark-fishing season, slashed the number of commercial shark-fishing permits by 90 percent, and declared some sharks off limits.

At about the same time, state officials in Florida — where the majority of shark attacks occur — launched a similar program. They instituted a strict one-shark-per-person fishing limit and banned two common fishing techniques within 3 miles of the shore, in effect creating a shark "sanctuary" near beaches.

The result? The shark population has increased dramatically. In fact, an average of 237,000 fewer sharks are caught annually now than in 1993, according to government statistics.

At the same time, the number of shark attacks has increased dramatically. Nationwide, the number of attacks off U.S. coasts jumped to 51 last year — up from only 21 in 1993, according to the International Shark Attack File at the Florida Museum of Natural History.

And in Florida, the state where most shark attacks occur, the number of shark-attack victims over that period rose by an astounding 325%, to 34 last year. In fact, so many swimmers have been terrorized over the past few months that *Time* magazine has labeled this season, "Summer of the Shark."

Over the Labor Day weekend alone, two people were killed by sharks. A 28-year-old

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Russian man was killed as he and his girlfriend swam in shallow water off the North Carolina coast, and a 10-year-old boy suffered fatal injuries when a 7-foot shark savaged him as he surfed with his father near Virginia Beach. In one especially horrific case in July, a bull shark tore the arm off an 8-year-old Mississippi boy who was swimming near Pensacola, Florida.

While it is impossible to say with 100% certainty that the shark-stock rebuilding program directly caused those attacks, it's plausible that the two are connected.

On one hand, hundreds of thousands of additional federally protected sharks are swimming around off the U.S. coastline. On the other hand, there has been a sharp rise in the number of shark attacks. You don't have to be a marine biologist to figure out that more sharks are going to lead to more shark attacks.

Tragically, the government didn't figure that out before plunging ahead with a program designed to increase the shark population.

That's why the shark-stock rebuilding program illustrates perfectly the Law of Unintended Consequences: Politicians pass a law to "solve" one problem, and unwittingly cause another problem — frequently worse than the original one.

For example, welfare programs intended to alleviate poverty end up getting poor people addicted to government handouts. Minimum wage laws designed to help the poor find good-paying jobs end up causing unemployment. And federal mandates forcing employers to provide medical care end up increasing health-care costs and causing employers to drop coverage.

So why should we be surprised that a program designed to protect sharks also has an unintended consequence — jeopardizing the lives of swimmers?

The real surprise would be if politicians started honestly informing us of the potential adverse effects of their programs, as well as the benefits. But doing that would jeopardize those very programs, along with the votes, the campaign contributions, and the re-elections that come along with them.

That's why politicians work so hard to extol the benefits of their programs, while concealing the true costs.

After all, it's easy to win public approval for protecting an "endangered species." Yet by doing so, unthinking politicians have endangered another, much more precious species: human beings.

So the next time some politician praises the virtues of his pet program, remind him about the federal shark-stock rebuilding project.

And try to imagine what the real consequences might be.

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NOTE: A photo of Mr. Dasbach and an electronic version of this essay are available.
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