



PRESS RELEASE

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New study reveals widespread support for human coexistence with seals and sharks on Cape Cod

Results may improve management and education

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Cape Cod, Massachusetts: A social science survey, *Human Dimensions of Rebounding Populations of Seals and White Sharks on Cape Cod, MA*, has highlighted striking differences in the way visitors, voters and commercial fishermen view seals and sharks on Cape Cod. These insights can help advance marine conservation, promote responsible stewardship, and foster co-existence.

“Tourism and commercial and recreational fishing are all critical parts of the Massachusetts Blue Economy,” said Matt Charette, director of Woods Hole Sea Grant, which funded the year-long study. “This comprehensive survey of Cape visitors, voters, and members of the fishing community builds a foundation for effective communication about conserving wildlife and reducing negative human interactions with sharks and seals.”

Representative samples of Cape Cod visitors, voters and commercial fishers – some 2000 individuals in total -- responded by mail and online to survey questions covering beliefs and attitudes about seals and sharks, experiences, views of lethal and non-lethal management, and if the presence of seals and sharks changed their behavior at the beach. Respondents’ knowledge of seals and sharks, where they get their information from, and other topics were also covered.

“This is one of the few studies to give voice to multiple stakeholders in the marine environment and to examine their views of both seals and great white sharks,” said principal investigator Professor Jennifer Jackman, Ph.D, from Salem State University's Department of Politics, Policy and International Relations. “As notable as some differences in perceptions are, our findings also reveal shared commitments among stakeholders to coexistence with marine wildlife and ecosystem health.”

Jackman was joined by a team from the University of Massachusetts-Boston, the Center for Coastal Studies, the Center for Animals and Public Policy at Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University, Cape Cod Commercial Fishermen’s Alliance and Atlantic White Shark Conservancy.



“This study fosters communication and collaboration between community partners and researchers to produce effective, science-based education,” said Catherine Macort, Director of Administration and Operations at the Center for Coastal Studies. “The analysis of the data collected demonstrates the importance of ecosystem and environmental messaging in promoting a better understanding of white sharks and seals and their habitat.”

One finding is that voters and tourists want to see seals and largely perceive them as beneficial, positive, enjoyable and an important part of the marine ecosystem. Tourists and voters also think sharks have aesthetic, ecological, and economic benefits.

“Two-thirds of tourists said that they hope to see seals, while nearly one-third hope to see sharks. The majority of tourists agreed that these species symbolize the beauty and wonder of Cape Cod,” said Rachel Bratton, Graduate Research Assistant and Master’s Candidate in the School for the Environment at the University of Massachusetts Boston, who recruited tourists at the Cape Cod National Seashore to participate in the survey last summer.

A team from Tufts Center for Animals and Public Policy also helped recruit tourists, design surveys, coordinate mailings and emails for the commercial fishermen survey as well as helped analyze the data.

“By starting to untangle the complex interactions among people, individual wild animals, and the marine ecosystem on which we all depend, this study embodies our Center’s belief that improving human-animal relationships relies on better understanding of those relationships,” said Allen Rutberg, director at the Tufts Center for Animals and Public Policy and research associate professor at Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University.

The survey also highlighted differences in perspectives commercial fishermen have about seals and to a lesser extent sharks.

Commercial fishermen often have negative perceptions of seals and their ecological, economic, and fishery impacts. They tend to blame seals for reducing and suppressing fish stocks, hurting the economy and creating public safety risks by attracting sharks.

Although commercial fishermen differ from other stakeholders in that they want the seal population managed, they, like visitors and tourists, prefer non-lethal management over lethal management of seals and sharks. Commercial fishermen, again similar to visitors and tourists, support the goals of the Marine Mammal Protection Act.

“Fishermen’s opinions come from a place of direct experience and intimate knowledge of the ocean, so it was critical that they be included in this public perception survey of seals and



sharks,” said Melissa Sanderson, chief operating officer of the Fishermen’s Alliance. “The Fishermen’s Alliance and its fishermen members have been advocating for non-lethal seal deterrent options; it is helpful to have this survey showing that voters and tourists agree.”

The study shows that sharks are viewed as a threat by the majority of voters, tourists, and commercial fishermen. But by large margins, respondents in all groups agree with the statement, “I am willing to accept some inconvenience and risk in order to have oceans where marine wildlife can thrive.”

One surprising finding is few respondents indicated they reduced beach visits because of sharks. Two-thirds of voters and tourists, and more than half of commercial fishermen, feel that they have control over whether they encounter a shark.

“The Atlantic White Shark Conservancy was proud to collaborate on this landmark study of the human perception of rebounding seal and white shark populations on Cape Cod,” said Marianne Walsh, education director, Atlantic White Shark Conservancy. “The data collected will influence development of the Conservancy’s outreach materials and education programs moving forward, especially since the study finds the public is generally unaware about the natural history and evolution of white sharks off Cape Cod. The study also provides valuable insight to help us effectively deliver public safety information to tourists and residents, as well as shape programs to further advance marine ecosystem conservation.”

“This study, created by an incredible multi-collaborator team, has enabled data to be collected to understand the perspectives and knowledge base of our community stakeholders as it relates to the rebound of sharks and seals on Cape Cod,” agreed Andrea “Dre” Bogomolni, Chair, co-founder of Northwest Atlantic Seal Research Consortium. “The data collected will be critical to guide education and future research, and ultimately help guide ways to coexist.”

Shared commitments to coexistence with marine wildlife and ecosystem health were apparent throughout the surveys: More than two-thirds of respondents in all three groups indicated a desire to “learn to share the ocean with the animals that live there.”

The study also received funding from The Elizabeth A. Lawrence Fund of the Tufts Center for Animals and Public Policy and Salem State University Faculty Scholarship Support Program, Department of Politics, Policy and International Relations, and Frederick E. Berry Institute of Politics.

An executive summary and full report of the study’s findings can be found online:
<http://seagrant.who.edu/sealshark>



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