



# Frequently Asked Questions about Sharks and Public Safety

Cape Cod National Seashore attracts more than 4 million visitors each year, who explore the national seashore's diverse natural environments and historic sites, and participate in recreational activities. While it is impossible to eliminate risk altogether in a natural environment like the seashore, park staff undertake many efforts to reduce risk by mitigating and eliminating hazards where feasible; communicating risk through signage, brochures, public programs, and social media; enforcing public safety regulations; encouraging safe behavior; and ensuring collaborative emergency response on the Outer Cape.

With recent research showing an increase in shark activity in Cape Cod waters, the national seashore is committed to continuing to educate ourselves and the public on how to recreate as safely as possible in wild habitats.

## **Are there sharks in the waters around Cape Cod National Seashore?**

Cape Cod's waters are part of a natural and wild marine ecosystem with a rich diversity of sea life. This includes many species of shark, including dogfish, thresher, sand tiger, basking, and white sharks.

## **Why are sharks suddenly at Cape Cod?**

Sharks have existed for 400 million years and have always been part of Cape Cod's marine environment. White sharks were in decline in the Atlantic until being designated a protected species in federal waters in 1997 and in state waters since 2005. The protected status of the shark, in combination with a growing seal population, which is rebounding after being hunted to near extinction, is contributing to an increase in sharks near shore.

## **What is the role of sharks in the marine environment?**

Sharks are top predators. They are critical for maintaining a healthy and balanced marine ecosystem.

## **Why has the seal population increased so dramatically here?**

Seals were once present around Cape Cod; however their numbers declined beginning in the 1880s when a bounty was placed on them out of concern for economically important fish populations. This mostly eliminated seals from this area. The bounty program ended in the late 1960s. The Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA), which prohibits killing, injuring, and harassing marine mammals, including seals, was enacted in 1972. The protection afforded by the lack of a bounty and by the MMPA's protection has allowed gray seals to recolonize the Cape.

## **What is the national seashore doing to keep the public safe from sharks?**

Since 2012, Cape Cod National Seashore has been part of the Regional Shark Working Group, whose members include staff and public safety officials from Cape Cod, the Islands, and the South Shore of Massachusetts, the Atlantic White Shark Conservancy, and the MA Division of Marine Fisheries. The working group collaborates on shark research, knowledge, and safety efforts. Products developed by the group to increase public awareness and safety include beach signage, brochures, purple shark flags, the Sharktivity app, and a shark smart video. The working group continues to consult with and has held public presentations with individuals from other regions where there are public safety concerns regarding sharks, including South Africa, and Australia. Seashore staff continue to participate in these discussions.

**What is the national seashore going to do about the increasing number of sharks?**

The white shark is a native species in the marine environment around Cape Cod. The park will continue to communicate educational safety messages aimed at reducing risk, and will remain an engaged partner in the Regional Shark Working Group to explore public safety options. People assume risk whenever they enter a wild environment that is typical of national parks. This includes Alaska, where there are grizzly bears; the southwest, where there are rattlesnakes; and the Rocky Mountains, where there are cougars. While people can modify their behavior to reduce risk, it is impossible to eliminate risk altogether.

**What is the national seashore going to do about the growing seal population?**

Like sharks, seals are native to the marine environment around Cape Cod. Once hunted to near extinction, seals are now protected under the 1972 MMPA. The act prohibits the “take” of marine mammals, including harassing, hunting, capturing, or killing (culling), or attempts to harass, hunt, capture, or kill any marine mammal. Jurisdiction for MMPA is shared by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s (NOAA) National Marine Fisheries Service. The National Park Service is required to enforce both the MMPA and National Park Service-specific regulations aimed at protecting wildlife.

**Are there plans to cull seal or shark populations to reduce risks to people?**

The National Park Service is committed to maintaining healthy, biodiverse habitats, and has no plans to reduce seal or shark populations.

**Some regions use lookout towers and nets to keep sharks out of recreation areas. Are these measures being considered at the national seashore?**

The Regional Shark Working Group is aware of and has discussed some of these methods. Local conditions such as water clarity, waves, availability of high points of land nearby, tides, and constantly shifting sandbars are among a few considerations that could impact the effectiveness of these measures on Cape Cod. These and other measures will continue to be explored.

**How do emergency responders communicate at the national seashore?**

National seashore staff use radios, cell phones, and satellite communication technologies to report and respond to emergencies. Satellite communications were deployed and used starting in summer 2018, but have limitations. We will continue to look for opportunities to improve communications, including enhanced cell phone coverage, emergency call boxes, and additional use of satellite technologies.

**How can I still recreate in Cape Cod waters and remain safe?**

There is always some risk when people enter the wild marine habitat. Water recreationists should be aware of naturally occurring hazards, such as tides and rip currents that can carry people far from shore; jellyfish-like animals that sting; and seals, which can bite and scratch. Be aware that sharks hunt for seals even in shallow water close to shore. Shark risk can be reduced by reading and heeding beach advisories, including: swim where there are lifeguards; do not swim near seals; swim, paddle, kayak, and surf in groups; avoid murky or low visibility water; avoid isolation; limit splashing; stay close to shore where rescuers can reach you; and adhere to all signage and flag warnings at beaches.