

ON ALERT

Shark fishing ban tough to enforce

By Adam Wagner
StarNews Staff

SOUTHEASTERN N.C. — Listening for the tell-tale whir of a shark tugging at the bait on the end of their line, a group of about

a dozen teenagers, two mothers and a man gathered one night recently in the fishing hut at the end of Oak Island Pier.

A stingray caught earlier in the day sat on the pier's wooden deck. Late in the

night, after something nibbled a hunk from one of the boys' bait, that stingray would be sliced up and used to try to draw more sharks in.

SEE BAN, A5



Fisherman Chuck Yow pulls a cart with his rod and reels after a night of shark fishing off the Oak Island Pier Thursday evening in Oak Island. MIKE SPENCER/STARNEWS

When another fisherman on the pier asked the boys for help bringing in a different stingray on the end of his line and let them keep it for their efforts, JJ Miller carried the dying fish to the end of the pier, chanting, "Shark! Bait! Hoohaha!"

Shark fishing is a way of life for this group, some of whom have dollar bills tucked into their reels because they think it could draw a shark to their line, alone, of the dozen or so dangling from the pier.

"Fish is fish," said Will Vest, 16, of Winston-Salem, who does not have a dollar bill in his reel. "They're gonna bite if they want to."

Way of life or not, the group's shark fishing efforts would lead to citations in some towns such as Carteret County's Emerald Isle and New Hanover County's Wrightsville Beach. Emerald Isle and Pine Knoll Shores both took actions to limit fishing on their beaches in the wake of several shark attacks on the Carolina Coast in June and July. Oak Island officials, though, have remained adamant that taking such steps in their area would be difficult and ineffective.

"Before you enact any ordinances whatsoever, you should determine your authority to do so and your method of enforcement," said Betty Wallace, Oak Island's mayor.

After a pair of June 14 attacks that maimed two vacationing teenagers, Oak Island asked the N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries to ban shark fishing through the Fourth of July weekend, a request the state agency denied. In other areas, fishing bans are local laws enforced by a town's police.

Oak Island, Wallace said, could have difficulty enforcing such a ban on its 9.2 miles of coastline with its 16 full-time police officers.

"It's not a simple question and there are no simple answers," Wallace said.

Emerald Isle, which temporarily banned shark



Chris Whitesides (from left), 13, checks his line as James Lutz, 15, Evan Vest, 13, and JJ Miller, 12, watch while shark fishing off the Oak Island Pier Thursday evening in Oak Island. MIKE SPENCER/STARNEWS PHOTOS



Evan Vest, 13, helps cut up a stingray for bait while shark fishing off the Oak Island Pier Thursday evening in Oak Island.

fishing on July 7, has 17 full-time and 14 part-time officers patrolling its town, including 13 miles of coast line. Nobody has been cited since the town enacted its shark fishing ban on July 7, said Jeff Waters, the town's police chief.

If an officer sees someone shark fishing, Waters said, they will let them know about the town's ban and ask them to stop before issuing a citation.

To differentiate between someone who is actively shark fishing and someone who accidentally lands a shark with more typical bait, Emerald Isle's officers look at the method fishermen are using.

"They'll take a kayak and haul the bait out there and drop an anchor on it and chum the water," Waters said. "They're fishing for sharks."

For Wrightsville Beach, chumming — or spreading bloody fish over water to attract predator fish like sharks — is the main indicator of shark fishing, said Dan House, the town's police chief.

It is rare for Wrightsville Beach's officers to issue a citation for shark fishing. Nevertheless, House said, they are on the lookout for activity, along with a park ranger who works in Wrightsville and pier employees.

"It's very rare that we somebody that's actually out there 'shark fishing,'" House said. "Most of the time, the sharks are more of a menace to our fishermen than anything else."

Shortly after Emerald Isle passed its ban, the division of Marine Fisheries reviewed whether the town had the authority to do so. After a couple days, it decided to not stand in the way of the town's decision.

"This is a major public safety issue," said Patricia Smith, a spokeswoman for Marine Fisheries. "This is something that we're just going to monitor on a case-by-case basis."

Surf City, which had two shark bites this summer, is reviewing what kind of actions it could take. Larry Bergman, the town's manager, is trying to tow the line between keeping ocean-goers safe and respecting the area's fishing tradition.

"I'm certainly playing that role of finding a reasonable balance and putting things in perspective," he said.

Bergman plans to give Surf City's council recommendations about keeping people safe from future shark attacks during its August 4 meeting.

"Really, I don't have any intention of a fishing ban," Bergman said. "Bans on chumming the water or a temporary ban on any kind of use based on some hazardous conditions, to me, are more useful as a town manager."

Even if Surf City does pass an ordinance giving the town manager power to limit activity on the beaches, Bergman said, he anticipates it being enforced on "pretty rare" occasions.

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EVERY WEDNESDAY
APRIL 1 - NOV. 18
& TUESDAY NOV. 24