

# Attack questions remain as shark fishing continues



Bailey Schucker, right, and his friend John Porter caught a shark during Memorial Day weekend in the waters around the Oak Island Fishing Pier. PHOTO CONTRIBUTED BY BAILEY SCHUCKER

Some beaches ban practice while others try

By Adam Wagner  
StarNews Staff

OAK ISLAND — With a decapitated grouper head in tow, Bailey Schucker, 16, and friend John Porter set out to catch a shark.

It was Memorial Day weekend and their spot of choice was the Oak Island Pier, which allows shark fishing at the off-shore end. The teenagers used a kayak to paddle the grouper head about 100 yards off the pier, leaving it anchored with a small weight so it wouldn't move.

That was at about 5 p.m. They climbed on top of the

pier and waited.

About 9:30 p.m., they got a bite.

## Requests denied

Shark fishermen like Porter and Schucker have been a presence in the waters around Oak Island without incident for decades — the Oak Island Pier even has the largest shark ever caught in North Carolina waters, a 1,150-pound tiger shark caught in 1966 and dubbed "YB Jaws," mounted and on display. And yet in the search for answers in the days following a pair

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## Surf City researches shark-related restrictions

By Trista Talton  
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SURF CITY — Can you close the beach? Will you close the beach? Do you have restrictions on chumming?

Surf City Town Manager Larry Bergman has been fielding these and

other questions since June 24, when an 8-year-old boy suffered what appeared to be a sharkbite off the town's shore.

Shark-related calls persisted this past weekend after a report that a 32-year-old Camp

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of June 14 attacks that saw two teens vacationing in Oak Island maimed, town officials questioned whether shark fishers could have drawn the predators toward shore and vulnerable swimmers.

Both Oak Island Pier and Ocean Crest Pier allow shark fishing at certain times of the day, but both have rules against chumming (intentionally scattering bloody fish parts to attract predators).

In an interview less than 48 hours after the attacks, Betty Wallace, Oak Island's mayor, said, "If we have people that are out here and purposefully shark fishing, what you do to shark fish is chum the water to attract the shark. I would feel better if we could do something to limit or ban that act of trying to chum the water."

Oak Island did try to limit shark fishing, asking the N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries on June 15 to ban the practice through the Fourth of July weekend. Louis Daniel, the director of the state agency, expressed skepticism about the request, saying the very act of fishing in large numbers could have a similar effect to chumming.

"This time of year you might have 50, 75, 100 people on the pier, and everybody's throwing bait in the water and cleaning fish and those kinds of things," Daniel said. "That basically sets up a huge chum slick."

Shortly after, Daniel declined the town's request. If he were to approve such a ban for Oak Island, Daniel said, he would have to enforce it statewide, and he didn't have the resources to do that and fulfill any other part of his agency's mission. Daniel also wondered

how his officers could prove someone who has a shark at the end of their line intentionally caught the animal.

After the state agency's denial, Tim Holloman, Oak Island's manager, asked the owners of both of the town's piers to ban shark fishing through Fourth of July weekend. The piers, he said, did not agree with that ban, and the town was powerless to enforce it.

### 'The hardest part'

Porter held on to the rod and, after fighting the shark for about a half an hour, the teens tried to work it from the end of the 900-foot pier, where shark fishing is allowed, to the beach. While Porter hung onto the rod, Schucker worked along the railing of the pier, dragging the 350-pound animal toward the shore.

"That was the hardest part," said Schucker, who lives in Wallburg, N.C.

Once the boys wrestled the shark into about 3 feet of water, Schucker sprinted off the pier, onto the beach and into the surf. He grabbed the animal by its tail and started to tug it toward the shore.

### Bans elsewhere

Decades ago, the Jacksonville Beach Fishing Pier was home to a shark fishing club. When that structure was replaced by a new 1,300-foot pier in 2004, the Florida city took steps to curb shark fishing, in part to keep swimmers safe.

"It's not a very good idea to let people fish for sharks in areas where people swim a lot," said George Forbes, Jacksonville Beach's city manager.

The Jacksonville Beach Pier isn't the only one with a shark-fishing ban. Cities such as nearby Myrtle Beach, S.C., and Virginia Beach, Va., have also outlawed the practice. Monday, Emerald Isle, N.C., voted to temporarily ban shark fishing and



Kevin Hart fishes off the Oak Island Pier in Oak Island on June 30. PHOTO BY MATT BORN

chumming until Sept. 15.

In New Hanover County, Wrightsville Beach has a ban on fishing for or baiting sharks. South of Wrightsville, Carolina Beach has no rules prohibiting catching sharks, while Kure Beach Fishing Pier advertises a shark fishing season that begins June 1 and ends Sept. 15.

"Shark fishing causes a lot of problems," said Vera Bryant, the Jacksonville Beach pier's manager. "We're a big tourist attraction, and the people out there get really upset when they see someone cut a stingray in half and put it out as bait."

When the Jacksonville Beach pier's longtime fishermen see someone breaking the rules, Bryant said, they don't hesitate to report the violation to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. The ban hasn't kept sharks from frequenting the area's water, though.

"We're actually overloaded with sharks," Bryant said.

### 'The worst is over'

Nobody knows what caused the shark attacks on North Carolina's coast

in June and July.

Matt Kenworthy, a research specialist at the University of North Carolina's Institute of Marine Sciences, said the recent attacks could be chalked up to any number of factors, from what sharks eat to water temperatures to where the animals could be mating.

One factor that is unlikely to have played a part in the attacks, though, is shark fishing.

"In terms of bringing in sharks, attracting sharks closer to the beaches, I wouldn't say that shark fishing is exactly bringing more sharks into the area by any of the methods that they're doing," Kenworthy said, reiterating Daniel's point that any fisherman using bait could attract a shark.

Data collected from the recent attacks, Kenworthy added, could be used if there is another spate of incidents in the future to determine if there is a common cause.

At East Carolina University, a team of shark experts has advanced one hypothesis focusing on the water's warmth.

Roger Rulifson, a senior

scientist at the school, and Chuck Bangle, a graduate student focusing on sharks, believe that higher-than-normal air and water temperatures could be forcing the animals to migrate earlier than usual, also cutting down on the amount of food available.

"If there were higher-than-usual water temperatures earlier in the year," Rulifson said, "this northward migration that would normally happen in waves could bunch together or maybe happen in a couple large groups. And they're moving northward, so they're all forced to spread out and find something to eat, which includes the beach."

To back their hypothesis, the ECU team points to the south-to-north pattern of the first six attacks. The last two attacks, he said, could be stragglers or anomalies.

If any more attacks happen this summer, Rulifson said, they could be the one or two that happen off the North Carolina shores in a typical season.

"I think the worst is over," he said.

### 'It'll whip your butt'

With the shark dragged

"Shark fishing causes a lot of problems. We're a big tourist attraction, and the people out there get really upset when they see someone cut a stingray in half and put it out as bait."

Vera Bryant, the Jacksonville Beach pier's manager

into 4 or 5 inches of water, Schucker and Porter stopped to take pictures and measure the animal — 8 feet, 1 inch long and between 300 and 350 pounds.

In one photo, posted to the Oak Island Pier's website, Schucker can be seen grinning at the camera, his hands on the sand tiger shark's fins, as Porter hangs on to the animal's nose.

"We always do the best we can to keep them in the water, put them through the least amount of stress we can," he said.

After all the photos were taken, Porter and Schucker let the shark return to the ocean. It was about 10:30 p.m.

The experience of catching a shark is challenging, Schucker said, but also a rush.

"It'll whip your butt. They're fun to catch, man," he said. "Catching something that's twice your size, three times your size, that's a lot of fun."

Schucker does not believe that shark fishermen are to blame for the recent shark attacks, instead pointing to sea turtles laying eggs in the area and the northward migration patterns of sharks.

"I think they're really just looking for something to blame it on," he said.

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