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Killing sharks: The media's role in public and political response to fatal human–shark interactions

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ABSTRACT

In 2013–14 the Western Australian Government deployed drum lines to catch and kill sharks perceived to be a threat to public safety. This policy decision sparked considerable controversy and debate which played out in the media. There have been limited studies examining the role of media discourses in the development of shark management policies. This study shows that media reporting reflected the unidirectional correlation between the public and policy makers; while there appeared to be a correlation between public pressure and the decision to deploy drum lines, there was no association between the culling program and public support. The reflective role the media played in the drum line debate was evident in their use of prescriptive and emotive language about human–shark incidents, and the use of two opposing frames; anthropocentric and conservation. Combined, these results suggest that the public policy makers need to rethink their approach to developing shark hazard mitigation programs through ongoing, meaningful engagement with the general public, scientists and stake holders, if they wish to garner public support.

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1. Introduction

"Seven fatal shark attacks in three years to the end of 2013 in Western Australia have cast a long shadow over our world famous beaches and left some of us feeling anxious about venturing into the water. The State Government listened to these concerns and is taking strong, practical steps to improve shark safety at our beautiful beaches and preserve our love affair with the ocean" [1].

There has been substantial debate in the media and academe about the Western Australian Government's decision in 2013, to expand existing shark hazard mitigation strategies with a baited drum line deployment program (see [2–4]). This program was announced by the Premier after the seventh fatal human–shark related incident in Western Australia between August 2010 and November 2013 [5]. The Premier stated that the deployment of baited drum lines off selected beaches in Western Australia was aimed at enhancing public safety by capturing and killing potentially dangerous sharks [6, p. 1].

In the summer of 2014, sixty baited drum lines were set approximately 1 km offshore at five metropolitan and three South-West locations in Western Australia, covering approximately 70 kms of the state's coastline [7]. Any great white (*Carcharodon carcharias*), tiger (*Galeocerdo cuvier*) or bull sharks (*Carcharhinus leucas*) caught on the drum lines that measured over three metres were destroyed using a firearm [7]. Over the three month period in which the drum lines were deployed, 172 sharks were caught and 50 were destroyed [8].

In March 2014 the Government sought approval for a three year extension of the program from the Environmental Protection Authority (EPA) and Department of Environment (DoE). In September the EPA recommended that the proposal not be implemented, citing a high degree of scientific uncertainty regarding the impact of the proposed program on 'vulnerable' [9] white shark populations [10]. As such, the static drum line program was abandoned and the Government instead focused on strengthening its capacity

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to respond to sharks considered a serious threat to public safety with aerial surveillance and capture [11].[1]

In a review of the drum line program published prior to the EPA's recommendations, the Department of Premier and Cabinet (DPC) criticised both public and media response to the program, arguing that "debate on the [program] has been clouded by emotional response and disproportionate media coverage" [7, p. 34]. Public opposition to the policy was expressed in legal challenges, public submissions to the EPA, protest rallies, freedom of information requests, petitions, postings on social media and reports in traditional media [7].[2] Over 100 of the world's leading shark experts campaigned against the drum line policy [12], with many scientists arguing that such programs had been "equivocal at best" in terms of increasing human safety, and, in some cases, had adverse effects on conservation efforts [13, p. 1,14,2]. The validity and justification of the drum line policy was called into question, particularly since shark ecology literature shows that shark behaviour has not changed, rather it is our perception and interpretation of human–shark interaction that has [15]. However, the Western Australian Government argued that "Incorporating scientific evidence into public policy is complex, but science alone will not provide the basis for the development of public policy" [7, p. 8].

Given the controversy surrounding the deployment of drum lines (see [2,3,16–19]), how and why did the Western Australian Government develop this approach to shark hazard mitigation? This research explores the development of shark hazard mitigation policy and, in particular, the role of media discourses in this process. Media discourse analysis was employed to examine output related to fatal human–shark incidents and shark hazard mitigation policy with the aim of exploring the role of the media and the public in the decision to implement the drum line policy.

1.1. Literature review

Understanding the social framing of human–shark interaction can provide an insight into shark conservation and management policy development [4,20]. Recent research has illustrated how the media responds to human–shark interactions [21], and the media's role in shaping public opinion of shark conservation and shark-related human fatalities [4,15]. Studies have also demonstrated the importance of public support in shark policy development and implementation processes [22,23]. However, there appears to be a gap in the research regarding the media's influence on policy development within the context of managing human–shark interaction [20,21,24].

Our understanding of the factors that influence public attitudes and behaviour toward a specific topic can be improved by assessing the role the media has in creating and shaping public perceptions [25,26]. Media coverage has contributed to the public's perception of sharks and human–shark interaction [20,21]. For example, Boissonneault et al. [27] demonstrated how articles published between 1969 and 2003 in Australia generated public discourse on the ecology and conservation of grey nurse sharks, and that the use of alarmist imagery in describing human–shark encounters could facilitate fearful attitudes towards the sharks. The majority of news coverage in Australia (and the United States of America) relating to human–shark interaction emphasised the risks posed to humans as opposed to the risks posed to sharks [21]. Other studies have revealed how sensationalised news reports contribute to negative images of sharks as fearsome and threatening creatures [4,21,22].

Policy development and implementation does not occur within a vacuum; public opinion, attitudes and behaviour can contribute to the policy process [23]. Neff [28] examined how policies aimed at addressing shark bite incidents in Sydney, Australia, were reactions to problem definition framing by 'policy entrepreneurs'[3] (see also [29]). Pro-conservation attitudes have been linked to pro-conservation behaviour in ocean users; Lynch et. al. [30] demonstrated how recreational fishers adhered to 'best practice' guidelines to handle and release elasmobranches. Similarly, positive attitudes and conservation-based behaviour of divers utilising the Great Barrier Reef off the north-east coast of Australia, "facilitated improved outcomes for marine resource management" [31, p. 761].

Neff's [4] study of shark mitigation policy framing around the *Jaws* movie narrative, situated the media in a passive role; the media simply reported politicians' public statements. However, it has been reported that the media not only plays a powerful, intermediary role in communicating facts, ideas and concepts between policy makers, scientists and the public [32–35], it can also reflect current cultural and political paradigms [32]. The combined effect of media, language and culture on policy development should not be underestimated [36]. However, there appears to be a lack of literature that considers media as an active participant in shark mitigation policy decisions. Therefore this research aims to address this gap by examining how the Western Australian Government's decision to implement the drum line policy was influenced by the media.

1.2. Framing

Media discourse can be defined as a set of interpretive packages that give meaning to an issue with each package having a central idea or frame at its core [32]. The identification and understanding of the central idea and its construction provide an insight into how the discourse may influence or interact with an audience's opinion on, or reaction to, a particular topic [32]. For instance, framing devices such as metaphors, exemplars, catchphrases, depictions and visual images can be used to subtly, or not so subtly, illicit fearful responses [37]. Neff and Hueter [15] argued that the use of emotive fear-laden descriptions to describe sharks and human–shark interactions (e.g. "man-eater", "rogue" and "attack") have "led to a criminalisation of shark bites" (p. 65). Studies that examined the use of fear in the media suggested that discourses of fear can make effective framing devices, particularly if the objective is to obtain an audience's attention or support, or incite particular emotional responses and behaviour (see [27,38,39]). There is evidence that the media has employed a discourse of fear in the framing of human–shark incidents. For example, Neff [40] observed how references to *Jaws* were used in newspapers to describe people's reactions to fatal shark bites in Australia in 2000. Therefore, it was anticipated that a discourse of fear would be evident in the media's framing of human–shark interactions in Western Australia.

How particular environmental discourses and frames can become mobilized by the media and gain traction among the general public, can be largely attributed to the public's ability to relate to it [41]. Personification is a derivative of 'dependency theory' (see [42]) where the "relative importance of media discourse depends on how readily available meaning-generating experiences are in people's everyday lives" [32, p. 9]. Personification provides a 'bridge' between the media's message and the audience's ability to relate to the message based on their personal experiences [41]. Personification can be used to connect "species with certain ideas through metaphors (which) has material consequences because it

[1] Allowed under existing legislation.

[2] Review report identified 765 articles in the press (local, national, International), 1100 radio news bulletins and 290 TV news items (Western Australia).

[3] Neff [28] uses Zhu's [29] definition of policy entrepreneur: "those who are willing to devote their time, energy, reputation and money to make policy changes" p. 316.

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