



ACTIVITY: Spearfishing

CASE [GSAF 1998.08.15](#)

DATE: Saturday August 15, 1998

LOCATION: The incident took place at Ambergris Cay, Bahamas.

NAME: Kevin Paffrath

DESCRIPTION: The diver, a 28-year-old white male, is 6'1" tall and weighs 215 lbs. He was wearing a black bathing suit, yellow face mask and a snorkel, black swim fins, and carried a black plastic Hawaiian sling and a five-foot steel spear. He wore no jewelry and had no injuries prior to the incident.

SUPPORT BOAT: A 19-foot blue-hulled Boston Whaler, powered by a 150-hp Evinrude motor, was idling.

BACKGROUND

WEATHER: Although the divers had encountered a squall earlier in the day and there were rain clouds in the area, the sky was clear at Ambergris Cay. Air temperature was estimated at 86° to 88°F.

MOON PHASE: Last Quarter, 14 August 1998

SEA CONDITIONS: The sea was calm, flat and there was no current. The water was very clear and the water temperature was estimated at 80° to 82°F. Mean high tide occurred at 11h00; at the time of the incident the tide was outgoing.

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ENVIRONMENT: The incident took place over a flat sandy bottom with patch reefs. No other boats were in the area, and the diver observed parrotfish, angelfish, butterflyfish and hogfish.

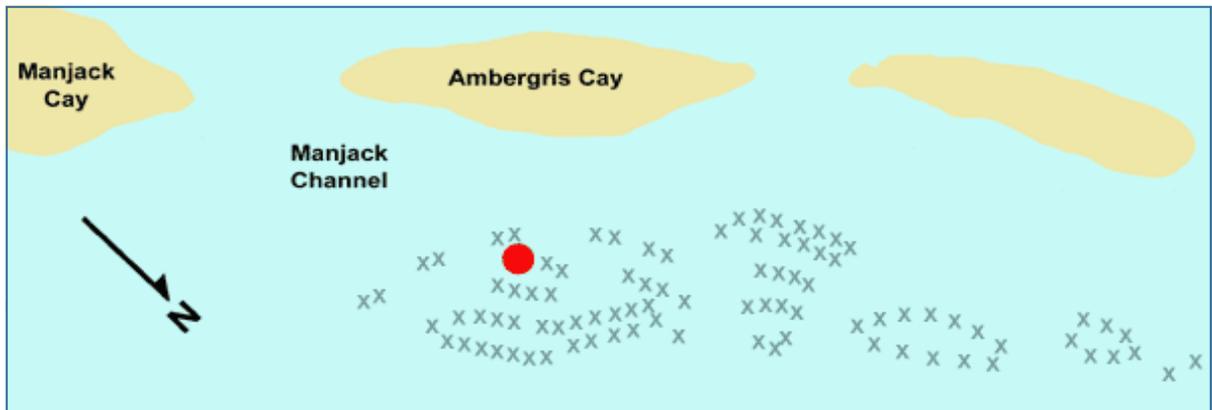
DISTANCE FROM SHORE: 1.5 miles

DISTANCE FROM REEF: Five to 10 feet from scattered reef.

DISTANCE FROM SUPPORT BOAT: 40 feet

DEPTH OF WATER AT INCIDENT SITE: 12 feet

TIME: 4:30 p.m.



NARRATIVE: Four divers, Kevin Paffrath, Jeff Holaday, Sean Noble and Van Conoley, owner of the boat and Kevin's father-in-law, left the dock at Green Turtle Cay at 10 to 10:30 a.m. (low tide) for a day of spearfishing. They initially dived at Hog Key and then moved west to Ambergris Cay.

Kevin had been in the water about 20 minutes and had aimed at, but missed, a hogfish, *Lachnolaimus maximus*. He was swimming along the edge of the reef when he spotted another large hogfish in the weeds and shot it behind the brain. The fish swam in a circular pattern and then came to rest on the sandy bottom. Kevin dived for the fish but it swam away, collided with a rock and was knocked unconscious. Kevin dived down a third time and retrieved the fish. While ascending to the surface he kept both hands on the spear, a hand on each side of the fish, holding both fish and the spear close to his chest.



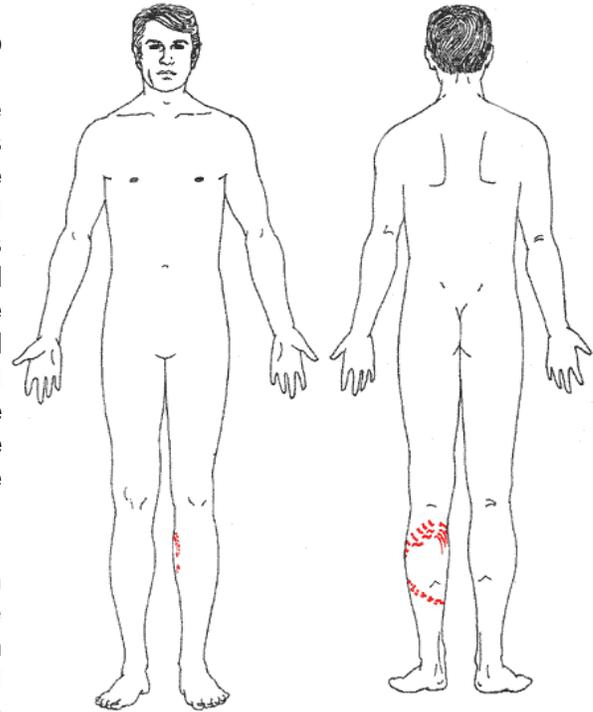
Hogfish

ARKive

Just as Kevin's head broke the surface, a shark grabbed

his left calf and pulled him downwards. When bitten, Kevin was facing Jeff Holaday (10' away), the boat (25' away), and the shore (1.5 miles away). The shark approached from behind and seawards of the diver. Kevin felt "pressure" when the shark bit him, but no pain, and he glanced back and saw the shark. The divers in the boat saw turbulence in the water behind Kevin just as he shouted, "I'm bit". When Kevin shouted, Jeff Holaday looked into the water and saw the shark dart away and streak towards the seabed. Kevin dropped the hogfish and spear and swam to the boat.

INJURY: The diver's left calf was bitten. No arteries or tendons were severed by the shark. Post-surgical photographs of the wounds were taken 18 hours after the incident by the diver's wife. The lower jaw of the shark sank into the diver's medial calf, its upper jaw into his lateral calf. During the initial contact the diver pulled his leg away from the shark, twisting it slightly and causing the six scratches of the upper jaw on the medial calf, six scratches on the lateral calf, and two teeth of the lower jaw scratched the lateral calf some distance below. It appears that the shark made a single bite and the remainder of the wounds occurred as the diver attempted to free his leg.



FIRST AID: On board the boat the diver laid down in the stern, but before the boat got underway he moved to the bow. His wound was washed with hydrogen peroxide. Ice was wrapped in a towel and placed against the wound to slow blood loss and his leg was elevated on a cooler. The ride to Green Turtle Cay took 30 minutes. As the boat approached the Cay, the divers radioed for assistance, asking that medical personnel meet them at the dock. The boat docked at Green Turtle Cay at 5:00 p.m.

TREATMENT: The diver arrived at Green Turtle Clinic (a satellite of Princess Margaret Hospital in Nassau) at 5:15 p.m. There, the local nurse, Barbara, flushed the wound with hydrogen peroxide and butadiene. Local anesthesia (novocaine) was administered by injection and 62 sutures were used to close the wounds.

SPECIES INVOLVED: According to witnesses, the incident involved a Caribbean reef shark about four to five feet total length. Based on wound size and jaw comparison, Dr. Gordon Hubbell concluded that the shark was between five and six feet in length.

COMMENT: Kevin has been diving for the past seven years, spending a month each year in the Bahamas. He reports that he has never seen the numbers of sharks that he saw on this trip. On dive trips to this area earlier in the year (May, June and July) one or two sharks were seen per day. However, on this trip he observed 12 to 15 sharks each day. The reef sharks were two to nine feet in length, most averaging four to six feet, and nurse sharks

ranging in size to about eight feet. He attributes the increase in sharks to the opening of the lobster season. The lobster season opened August 1st, two weeks before the incident. Local lobster fishermen remove the tails of lobsters at sea and toss the offal overboard. The offal attracts fish such as groupers, and the sharks, in turn, are attracted to the fish. It is possible that the shark was aroused by the low-frequency vibrations created by the speared hogfish, followed the blood trail to the diver, and bit the diver by mistake.

CASE INVESTIGATOR: Erich Ritter, Ph.D., Global Shark Accident File

