

ACTIVITY: Swimming

CASE: **GSAF 2004.10.30.X**

DATE: Saturday October 30, 2004

LOCATION: The incident took place off Ocean Beach, near Whangarei, New Zealand.

NAMES & DESCRIPTIONS: The group consisted of 47-year-old Lifeguard Rob Howes, his 15-year-old daughter Niccy, 15-year-old Karina Cooper, 16-year-old Helen Slade, all members of the Whangarei Heads Surf Lifesaving Club.

BACKGROUND

SEA CONDITIONS: The water was clear according to the lifeguards.

DISTANCE FROM SHORE: 100 metres.



Picture / John Stone

Lifeguard Rob Howes

NARRATIVE: The group was swimming when a pod of seven bottlenose dolphins sped towards them and herded them together. "They were behaving really weird," Mr Howes said, "turning tight circles on us, and slapping the water with their tails."

Mr Howes and Helen Slade had drifted about 20 metres away from the others when a dolphin swam straight at them and dived a few metres in front of them. "I turned in the water to see where it was going to come up, but instead I saw this great big grey fish swim around me," said Mr Howes. The veteran lifeguard identified the fish it as a great white shark about three metres in length. "It glided around in an arc and headed for the other two girls. My heart went into my mouth, because one of them was my daughter. The dolphins were going ballistic."

Mr. Howes said the dolphins herded the swimmers and circled protectively around them for another 40 minutes, fending off the shark. "I swim with dolphins perhaps three or four times a year here at this beach and I have never in six years seen them behave like that."

Lifeguard Matt Fleet was patrolling out from the surf beach in a rescue boat and saw the dolphins' unusual behaviour. He dived out of the boat to join the group and also saw the white shark. Mr Fleet said the water was clear and he had a good view.

Mr Howes said he sat on the story for three weeks, "purely because I did not know quite how to handle it. The only reason he went public was I didn't want anyone to get chomped [by the shark], so I couldn't be accused of not having made people aware there was a shark out there".

INJURY: No injury. ***This incident is not a shark attack or a threat display by a shark. It is recorded only as an example of bottlenose dolphin and shark interaction.***

SPECIES INVOLVED: The incident involved a three-metre white shark, *Carcharodon carcharias*, seven bottlenose dolphins, three subadult human females and one adult male.

COMMENTS: Dr Rochelle Constantine, from the Auckland University School of Biological Science, said it was a rare event, but she had heard of similar things happening overseas. She said sharks were not normally a threat to New Zealand's bottlenose dolphins, but the dolphins would attack them if they felt at risk. "From my understanding of the behaviour of these dolphins they certainly were acting in a way which indicated the shark posed a threat to something. Dolphins are known for helping helpless things. It is an altruistic response and bottlenose dolphins in particular are known for it."

Ingrid Visser, who has studied marine mammals for 14 years, said there had been reports from around the world of dolphins protecting swimmers. "[The dolphins] could have sensed the danger to the swimmers and taken action to protect them."

New Zealand fishermen may have killed two of the dolphins that helped protect swimmers from the white shark. Two dead dolphins were found on Wednesday November 24, 2004, in a river in the upper reaches of Whangarei Harbor, reported animal protection officer Jim Boyd. Their tails had been hacked off, and officials believe they may have been mutilated by criminals poaching fish.

SOURCES: Ainsley Thomson, The New Zealand Herald, November 24, 2004
<http://www.nzherald.co.nz/storydisplay.cfm?storyID=3613343&thesection=news&thesubsection=general>
http://www.news.com.au/common/story_page/0,4057,11506873%25E401,00.html