

ACTIVITY: Swimming

CASE: GSAF 2006.01.07

DATE: Saturday January 7, 2006

LOCATION: Rainbow Channel off Amity Point Beach, North Stradbroke Island, Queensland, Australia.

27.4°S, 153.6°E

NAME: Sarah Whiley

DESCRIPTION: She was a 21-year-old female. She was living Brisbane and was studying her third year of occupational therapy at the University of Queensland.

BACKGROUND

WEATHER: At 17h00, Brisbane recorded mostly cloudy skies and visibility of 6.2 miles [10 km]. The air temperature was 78.8°F [26°C], dew point 66.2°F [19.0°C], humidity 65%, sea level pressure 29.77 inches [1008 hPa], and wind direction was SSE 13.8 mph/22.2 km. By 17h30 the sea level pressure increased to 29.80 inches/1009 hPa, and the wind was 16.1 mph [25.9 km/h].

MOON PHASE: First Quarter, 58% of the moon was illuminated.

SEA CONDITIONS: The water was murky due to northerly winds. "There's been stormy weather in the last few days with overcast conditions and a lot of fresh water run-off, low light conditions and you had a high tide," reported Jeff Johnson of the Queensland Museum who noted the steep drop-off from the sand bank would have also increased the likelihood of sharks in the area.

ENVIRONMENT: The attack took place in an area that is prone to washouts, some reaching depths of 30 to 40 feet. A witness, Cathryn McKenzie had noticed Ms Whiley's group of four swimming about 25 metres away, but after returning to the beach she had become more concerned with two teens who had swum out 200m to approach a pod of dolphins. Rainbow Channel was laden with seaweed at the time of the attack. According to one source, Whiley's dog — a border collie — was in the water with her when she was bitten by the shark.



Sarah Whiley

A government report confirmed a newspaper report that actions of local fishermen cleaning their fish at a nearby boat ramp were factors in this incident. Bloodied fish remains were thrown into the water moments before the attack. It was also reported fishermen were

casting buckets of burley into the nearby sea – as a boy thrashed a fish carcass in the water.

DISTANCE FROM SHORE: 20 metres

DEPTH OF WATER: Waist-deep to chest-deep

TIME: 17h15

NARRATIVE: Sarah Whiley and eight friends from a church group were renting a nearby holiday house. They went to the beach at dusk. There were nine adults and six teenagers on the beach. According to witnesses, Sarah was swimming with three of her friends but swam out of the clear shallows into the deeper water of Rainbow Channel where marker buoys signified the presence of drumlines. Drumlines are a series of floats moored by an anchor, with one or more baited hooks on a cable that runs between an anchor and the float. This put her near baits and marine detritus that attracts bull sharks.

Sarah was swimming back to her friends in the shallows and was about five metres from where they were clustered when she was attacked (early reports said she was scuba diving). She was pulled underwater for about five seconds then surfaced and called out “Shark!”. “She started yelling out for help and everybody just stopped and looked around,” said Vivienne Holcroft, who watched the tragedy from the beach. “Nobody knew what was happening. There were a lot of dolphins in the water. Then she started screaming again.” Initially her friends thought she was joking but they rushed to her aid when they saw blood in the water.

INJURY: Fatal. Both arms were severed below the elbow and she sustained deep wounds to her right thigh and torso. She died of hypovolemic shock.

FIRST AID / TREATMENT: Sarah was pulled from the water by two fishermen and dragged on to the beach. A local teenage girl, who tried to comfort the injured woman while she lay on the beach, said she was still conscious at that time. Frantic bystanders scrambled for towels to stem the bleeding. The island's ambulance service carried Sarah on a stretcher the 25 or so metres off the beach and up the trail of fine sand to their vehicles. Then they raced about two kilometres to the cricket oval adjacent to the community centre where a helicopter arrived to take her to Brisbane's Princess Alexandra Hospital 40 miles away.

Lachlan Parker, a paramedic, said there was little they could do to for severely injured young woman. “She had lost significant amounts of blood,” he said. Emergency Services Rescue Helicopter crew officer Rod Morgan said Sarah had suffered massive blood loss. “We were diverted right away and were able to be on the scene within minutes and were able to have the patient at hospital within an hour of the attack.” She died at the hospital. Her body was cremated, and the funeral was held on January 13th.

SPECIES: Inspector Harding said the young woman's injuries indicated that she was attacked by several bull sharks, which are said to be particularly aggressive during the Australian summer when they hunt together. “I'm of the opinion that more than one shark was involved,” he said. “There could have been up to three.” The January 15, 2006 edition of the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that shark tooth fragments recovered from Sarah's body are being DNA tested to identify the type and number of sharks involved in the attack.

CSIRO Research Scientist Richard Pillans, who has been studying bull sharks, said, "The statistics from the drum lines in the area suggests that the bull sharks dominate the catches. I think they've caught 19 sharks in the area in the last year and I think 15 of those were bull sharks". He said the spot where the attack occurred is the perfect environment for bull sharks. "There's lots of food, lots of turtles, dugongs, stingrays and there's lots of fish and that particular area is adjacent to a deep channel".

Another Australian shark expert, Andrew Fox, said the attack had all the hallmarks of the bull shark, a "large, robust shark" that is not afraid to come into shallower water in search of prey. Locals at Amity Point said shark sightings were not uncommon in the nearby waters. One resident, Miles Scott, said local fishermen were particularly wary of the bull shark, which had been known to attack their boats. "They're a very, very aggressive shark and they don't care what they're attacking - even propellers on our outboards," he said.

A Queensland Surf Life Saving Association spokeswoman said the Gold Coast-based Westpac helicopter routinely patrols popular beaches, including island beaches, as far north as the Sunshine Coast during weekends and on public holidays. It regularly sights sharks and gives warnings for beaches to be cleared. However, the helicopter did not fly over Amity Point Beach on Saturday, although it did conduct aerial patrols on Sunday and Monday during a hunt for the sharks. The QSLSA spokeswoman said the Westpac helicopter's regular patrols were in accordance with available resources and dependent on conditions, with the focus both on drowning prevention as well as reporting sharks.

Afterwards, the Queensland state government ordered an investigation into the incident. Shark nets and drum lines had been installed at Amity Point in an effort to protect swimmers from sharks. However, shark nets and drum lines simply cull sharks. The acting Queensland premier, Anna Bligh, conceded that the drum lines had not provided "an impenetrable barrier between bathers and sharks".

SOURCES: Daily News, January 8, 2006; Glenis Green, Courier-Mail (Brisbane), January 12, 2006; http://www.thecouriermail.news.com.au/common/story_page/0,5936,17796758%255E3102,00.html; Sydney Morning Herald, January 13, 2006; The Age, <http://www.theage.com.au/news/national/death-in-the-shallows/2006/01/13/1137118967058.html>; Sunday Mail, January 15, 2006

CASE INVESTIGATOR: Terry Peake, Global Shark Accident File



Woman may have been killed by three sharks

Associated Press

SYDNEY, Australia — Up to three sharks may have been involved in the fatal attack on a 21-year-old woman off an island in eastern Australia, police said today.

The woman, whose identity was not immediately released, died late Saturday after being attacked near North Stradbroke Island, east of the Queensland state capital Brisbane.

Queensland state police inspector Peter Harding said officers were searching for the sharks and had closed several nearby beaches.

Shark attack kills Australian woman

SYDNEY, Australia — Up to three sharks may have been involved in the fatal attack on a 21-year-old woman off an island in eastern Australia, police said Sunday.

Sarah Whiley died late Saturday of severe injuries after being attacked near North Stradbroke Island, east of the Queensland state capital Brisbane.

The woman was swimming with a friends from a church group in shallow water about 50 feet offshore when the shark attacked, local media reports said.

The woman's dog was also in the water.

Whiley was airlifted to a Brisbane hospital where she had to have both arms amputated just below the elbow, according to Queensland Rescue Helicopter spokeswoman Helen Anderson. She also suffered deep wounds to her legs and torso, Anderson said.

Harding said the severity of the woman's injuries indicated she may have been attacked by a group of bull sharks, a species known for aggressive behavior this time of year.

— Associated Press

Daily News 1-8-06