

CASE: GSAF 2013.09.01.c

DATE: Sunday September 1, 2013

LOCATION: The incident took place at a shark tank in the Key West Aquarium, located at 1 Whitehead Street, Key West, Monroe County, Florida, USA.

NAME: Unknown

DESCRIPTION: Female, between two- and three-years-old.

BACKGROUND

TIME: 14h00

NARRATIVE: No details. Aquarium website states visitors can touch juvenile nurse sharks on the tail after employees feed them, but it is not known what happened or what preceded the incident. According to Rose Horn, who witnessed the incident, said, "The girl's arm was in the shark's mouth up to her elbow, Basically, the whole girl's arm was in the shark's mouth and most of the shark was out of the water."

INJURY: Minor

TREATMENT: The girl was transported by ambulance to Lower Keys Medical Center where she was treated for minor injuries and released,

SPECIES: Nurse shark

REPORTED BY: Al Brenneka, Shark Attack Survivors

COMMENT: A nurse shark feeds on small fish and clams by latching on and sucking them into its mouth. They also feed on dead fish that turn white in the water. The white flash of human skin can incorrectly trigger a feeding response.



Nurse shark bites little girl's arm at aquarium

A little girl was bitten by a nurse shark at the Key West Aquarium on Sunday but was not seriously injured, according to local reports.

"I heard a bunch of commotion, turned around and saw a man that I'm assuming was the father, holding the girl and pulling her away from the tank," said Rose Horn, of Ramrod Key, who was visiting the Old Town attraction with her husband, flats guide Sandy Horn, and their two children at about 2 p.m. Sunday.

The girl was taken from the aquarium, 1 Whitehead St., to Lower Keys Medical Center where she was treated for minor injuries and released, said Care Ambulance supervisor Dave Erwin and hospital spokesman Randy Detrick.

No police report was taken of the incident, said city spokeswoman Alyson Crean.

But Rose Horn recalled a ghastly sight that prompted her family to immediately leave the aquarium. "The girl's arm was in the shark's mouth up to her elbow," she said. "Basically, the whole girl's arm was in the shark's mouth and most of the shark was out of the water."

Horn described the girl as about 3 years old, but no younger than two.

The toddler was near the large pool-like aquarium that houses nurse sharks as well as sandbar and bonnethead sharks.

Not wanting their own children, ages 1 and 3, to view the scene once the girl was bitten, the Horns hurried out of the aquarium.

Historic Tours of America (HTA) owns and operates the aquarium.

Two messages left with HTA's CEO Chris Belland were not returned Tuesday.

The Key West Aquarium website states visitors can touch juvenile nurse sharks on the tail after employees feed them, but it was unclear what happened or what preceded the incident Sunday.

"I've been there a bunch of times and I've never heard of this happening," Sandy Horn said. But, he added, "nurse sharks can bite and I think people forget that."

Nurse sharks are bottom-dwelling fish not known for aggressive behavior and are often seen by divers on the reef, said University of Miami marine biologist Neil Hammerschlag. Hammerschlag, whose research is available at sharktagging.com, spoke to The Citizen Tuesday about nurse shark behavior in general. Nurse sharks typically bite humans only when provoked, Hammerschlag said. "They swallow prey whole by latching on and sucking fish in," he said.

Nurse sharks, like most other sharks, feed on dead fish that turn white in the water. The white flash of human flesh can incorrectly trigger a feeding instinct in sharks, which is why he wears all black Neoprene while doing research, Hammerschlag said. "That reaction is not outside the realm of possibility," Hammerschlag said.

SOURCE: Keynews, Wednesday September 4, 2013, <http://keysnews.com/node/49798>