



**ACTIVITY:** Swimming

**CASE:** GSAF 2014.04.03

**DATE:** Thursday April 3, 2014

**LOCATION:** Tathra, 340 kilometres (210 miles) south of Sydney, New South Wales, Australia.

**NAME:** Christine Armstrong

**DESCRIPTION:** She was a 63-year-old female from Tathra, a senior surf club trainer who had been swimming in the same spot nearly every morning for the past 14 years. She was wearing a pink and orange bathing cap.

#### **BACKGROUND**

**WEATHER:** At 08h00, Nowra Ran Air Station recorded visibility of 6.2 miles, air temperature 64.4°F [18°C], dew point 62.6° [17°C] F, humidity 94%, sea level pressure 30.01 inches and wind direction was NW at 4.6 mph. Next day, April 4, 2014, Bequa recorded air temperature of 57°F [13.9°C], humidity 91%, rain and wind direction of SSW at 7 mph. At



*Scene of the fatal shark attack.  
Photo: Ben Smyth, Bega District News*



Tathra, on the day of the attack the sky was slightly overcast and the air temperature was 75.2° to 77°F [24° to 25°C].

**MOON PHASE:** Waxing Crescent, 12% of the Moon was illuminated New Moon, April 1, 2014.

**SEA CONDITIONS:** Shark Researcher Kent Stannards reported that sea conditions were good. The sea surface temperature was around 71.6°F [22°C], and there was a small swell.

**ENVIRONMENT:** Tathra is North of Twofold bay where early last century a whaling station had been established and numerous white sharks were often seen feeding on the whale carcasses (see *Killers of Eden* by Tom Mead).

Rob Mead, Armstrong has spent 60 years in Tathra and has had a long association with the local surf lifesaving club. He said that in the 1950s, the club patrolled around the cliffs and had seen sharks in the area, and there is a sign on the wharf installed by council banning people from shark fishing, which was a popular pastime in the pre-1990s. Kent Stannards reported according to commercial fishers “big sharks have been regularly along this coast this year”, and a large white shark was caught in nets off Tathra in February 2014.

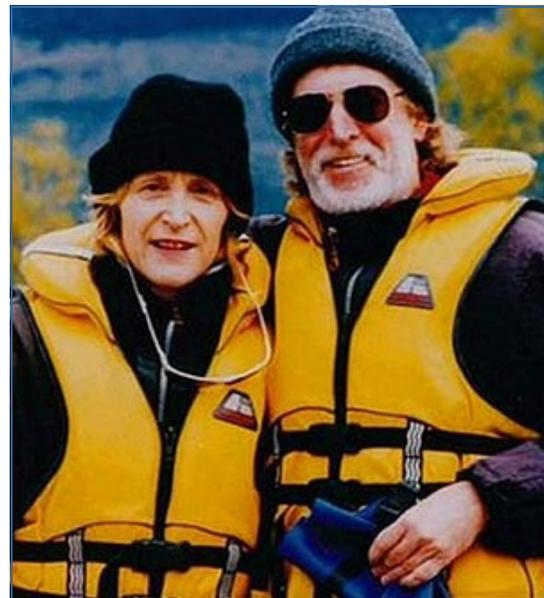
Tathra lifeguards had warned about the dangers of big sharks near the wharf after local fishermen used illegal baits to lure sharks. As early as 2012, Tathra Surf Life Saving Club surf boat captain Sharon Clarke expressed concern for a group of swimmers who swam between the beach and the wharf every morning. At the time, the surf club found a black balloon floating 150 metres off the beach, which was holding bait to lure sharks in for fishermen. “And this was between the flags only 150 metres off-shore, with 100 people swimming there,” Ms. Clarke told the *Bega District News* at the time. “We all swim in the ocean knowing there are sharks, but you don’t like the idea that there are people luring and attracting sharks in so close.” And in January 2014 paddlers and surf boat crews in the George Bass Marathon reported concerns about large sharks.

**DISTANCE FROM SHORE:** 100 metres

**TIME:** 08h20



*Christine Armstrong*



*Christine and Rob Armstrong*

**NARRATIVE:** Christine Armstrong was with a group that included her husband, Rob, and four other swimmers that regularly swam a 250-metre circuit between Tathra Wharf and Tathra Beach. The group had left from the surf club and were swimming to the wharf when Christine, feeling sore from her recent flight from New Zealand, turned back.

The group was returning from the wharf when Rob Armstrong saw the birds, realized something was going on, and stopped. "There was a large three to four metre bronze whaler lying on top of the water, clearly visible, birds all around it," he said.

"My immediate concern was for my friends. Mary, who's my 70-year-old dear, dear friend was swimming straight for it, and Patrick, so we got them together and formed a barrier. [We] couldn't find Colleen, I hoped everything was OK, I was panic-stricken for Colleen and then as we got closer to the beach I could see Colleen emerging from the water. We thought everything was safe so we hugged each other <sup>≠</sup> and then we found Chris wasn't in the change rooms."

The swimmers took a boat out to start their search, and quickly found "evidence that Chris is no more".

The group raised the alarm and a search began, involving a helicopter, police launch, rescue boats and jet skis. The search for the woman was called off about 17h00 (AEDT) due to poor weather. The swimmer's goggles, swim cap and partial human remains were recovered.

**INJURY:** Fatal

**SPECIES:** The attack reportedly involved a bronze whaler shark three to four metres in length. However, Mr. Myatt notes: "I am familiar with this case it is only a few hours' drive from my home and I have dived this area in the past. The area has a reasonable number of white sharks who follow the whale migration up the coast, the description in the newspaper of the shark being a bronze whaler in my opinion is incorrect, a bronze whaler maximum length of 10 feet which is around 3 metres and this is maximum length it would be a record to have a bronze whaler over 3 metres as most caught are around 2.5 metres or 8 feet."

"To take the whole body it must have been a fairly large shark the description therefore more aptly fits a white shark. Fisherman have been known to catch them from the wharf before the sport was banned due to the protection of the species."

**CASE INVESTIGATOR:** Bob Myatt, Global Shark Accident File



*The man-eater shark which nearly got Cedric Bragg and George Craig, who were unwise enough to think about swimming in the Kiah River while a whale was being chopped up at the tryworks, seen in the background at the far right. This monster was 17 feet 8 inches long and 12 feet around the girth. Standing behind the shark are (from left): Arthur Atkins, Harry Davidson, Jack Davidson, Cedric Bragg, George Davidson, George Craig, Bill Greig, Alex Greig, and Charlie Davidson. In front of them are two of George Davidson's children.*

—Photo by W. T. Hall, Eden. By courtesy of the Eden Killer Whale Museum.



*The stretch of water at Tathra where a woman was taken by a shark this morning.  
Picture: @Purlavie Source: Supplied*