

ACTIVITY: Surfing

CASE: GSAF 1982.08.29.b

DATE: Sunday August 29, 1982

LOCATION: The incident took place in the Pacific Ocean at Morro Rock in Morro Bay, San Luis Obispo County, California, USA.

35 22.5'N; 120 52.0'W

NAME: John Buchanan

DESCRIPTION: He is a 17-year-old male.

SURFBOARD: His board was more than 2 m in length, with a red bottom and sides.

BACKGROUND

MOON PHASE: Waxing Gibbous, 78% of the Moon was illuminated. Full Moon on 3 September 1982

SEA CONDITIONS: Water visibility was 4 to 5 m. Buchanan recalled, "The water was pretty clean."

ENVIRONMENT: Robert N. Lea, California Fish & Game, reported: "On the day before [this incident] there had been two shark sightings at this beach. These could have been blue sharks, basking sharks, or for that matter any other surface-dwelling shark."

DISTANCE FROM SHORE: 100 metres from the beach and 100 metres north of Morro Rock.

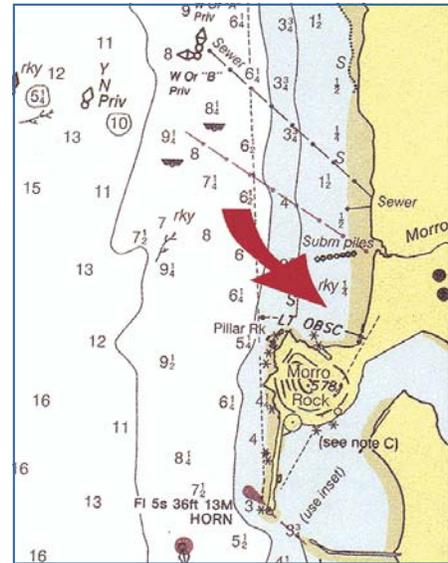
TIME: 10h20

NARRATIVE: Buchanan was 50 metres south of seven or eight surfers. He was sitting up on his board, his feet dangling from either side, when there was a bump to the left front edge of the surfboard. He glanced down and saw "the head of an animal, colored gray, with a slight cast of brown. It looked smooth and somewhat pointed." The surfer was knocked into the water and began thrashing wildly as he swam toward the beach, some 75 m away. His surfboard was pulled about 10 m across the surface toward the open sea before it was released. Buchanan regained his composure and, after abandoning his board, caught a wave, body surfing to the beach. Unaware of his plight, a fellow surfer, thinking he had been injured, swam out to retrieve his board. Fortunately for this "Good Samaritan," the assailant did not return.

INJURY: The surfer did not receive any injuries, although he may have had shattered nerves. The surfboard was a different story.

DAMAGE TO SURBOARD: There were two elongated impressions, each five centimetres in length, with three smaller punctures and one large circular indentation. These were the only marks to the surfboard.

SPECIES: It is not always possible to determine the species of shark involved in an incident. In fact, in a few cases reported during the Twentieth Century there was a question as to whether a shark was even involved at all.. This case history may be an example of a shark being blamed for an attack simply because sharks are known to attack surfers — a case of "guilt by association."



Following an extensive background investigation into this case, one additional suspect could be added to the list of possible culprits: a pinniped. Buchanan's description of his attacker indicated: "The animal had kind of a pointed head and was colored gray with a hint of brown." A pinniped's snout is somewhat pointed, and several species common to the Pacific Coast, including Harbor Seals, *Phoca vitulina richardsi*, are colored gray/brown. The pinniped's predominant whiskers might have been lying flat against its head — a common behavior when sticking their heads quickly out of water and playing with or biting objects. They are also known to frequently harass surfers, including the ramming of their surfboards with such force that the riders are sometimes knocked into the water. Finally, Lea reported a circular indentation to the board's bottom.

After examining the dentition of sharks common to the Pacific Coast, it was determined that none could replicate the damage reported to the bottom of the surfboard by Lea. Comparisons were made with the dentition from the following shark species: white shark, *Carcharodon carcharias*, blue shark, *Prionace glauca*, shortfin mako shark, *Isurus oxyrinchus*, sevengill shark, *Notorynchus cepedianus*, and sixgill shark, *Hexanchus griseus*. None replicated the documented damage sustained to the board.

However, the upper and lower canine teeth of a pinniped typically produce circular impressions (holes) and have the appropriate spacing to cause the ridges on the board, as described by Lea. Further, California Department of Fish & Game spokesman Paul Chappell was quoted in a local newspaper as saying: "Preliminary investigation indicates... that the bite was not made by a shark. The bite pattern does not look like a shark made it. It could have been just a very playful seal. Harbor Seals are known to frequent the area where the attack occurred." Ultimately, it was not possible to determine what species of marine animal was responsible for the attack on John Buchanan's surfboard.

SOURCES: Robert N. Lea and D. Miller, Ralph Collier, pages 87 to 89; Shark Research Committee, http://www.sharkresearchcommittee.com/unprovoked_surfer.htm

CASE INVESTIGATOR: Ralph Collier

