

ACTIVITY: Spearfishing
CASE: GSAF 1986.12.04 / SA-347
DATE: Thursday December 4, 1986
LOCATION: The incident took place at Platbank, between Rooikrans and Cape Point off the Cape Peninsula, Western Cape Province, South Africa.



Hans Kiesouw

NAME: Rory O'Connor
DESCRIPTION: He is a 22-year-old male. The diver, 1,78 metres tall and weighing 68 kilograms, was wearing a light blue full wetsuit, long green swim fins, yellow and black weightbelt, and a black mask. He carried a shiny silver-barrelled speargun and had red stumpnose, *Chrysoblephus gibbiceps*, and an assortment of reef fish on a stringer, but he wore no jewelry and had no injuries.

BACKGROUND

WEATHER: The day was sunny and warm, with a light northerly breeze.

MOON PHASE: New Moon, December 1, 1986

SEA CONDITIONS: The sea was green-coloured and calm with nine-metre visibility. Water temperature was measured at 19°C and there was a slight southerly current.

ENVIRONMENT: The diver was participating in an inter-varsity spearfishing competition during which yellowtail, *Seriola lalandi*, Roman, *Chrysoblephus laticeps*, and reef fish were shot. Several seals had been seen by divers.

DISTANCE FROM SHORE: 250 metres

DEPTH OF WATER: 12 metres, but the incident took place 4.5 metres below the surface.

TIME:

NARRATIVE: Although 20 spearfishermen were in the water no one was within 20 metres of O'Connor. The diver was over a sandy bottom with scattered reefs, but encountered the shark near rocky pinnacles which rose 10 metres above the sea floor "We had been in the water for two hours, when I noticed an abandoned float in the water. There were fish on the float but none showed evidence of having been bitten by a shark. I later discovered that the float belonged to my companion who had been charged by a large shark", said O'Connor.

"I stayed in the vicinity for another 10 minutes and shot two more fish. While I was stringing them on my float, a 1,8-metre copper shark came screaming off the bottom at me; it was obvious that it was going for my legs and had no interest in the fish. I lashed out at it with my speargun. The shark turned round and repeated the attack behaviour five times in rapid succession before it disappeared."

About three minutes after the 1,8-metre shark left, an even larger shark was encountered. The diver was looking down into the water when a three-metre, 300-kilogram shark exhibited the same behaviour as the 1,8-metre shark. As before, the shark charged without warning. "This shark, however, was far more aggressive than the previous shark; it rolled on its side and came back at me with its mouth open. My only alternative to being

bitten was to hit the shark with my speargun and display aggression in return”, said O'Connor.

“I had my face down in the water and was swimming back to shore when I swam into something. I thought it was the shark but it was another diver from the Stellenbosch team. Together we dived at the large shark – which by this time had made three passes at me – and the shark was chased off. We swam back to shore as fast as we could without showing any panic.”

“All the teams were harassed by sharks but none of the other sharks showed as much aggression as the two I encountered”, said the diver. “The local spearfishermen remarked that such behaviour was uncommon and concluded that the sharks had been attracted to the area by the large amount of fish that had been shot.”

INJURY: The diver was not injured by either shark.

SPECIES: A 1,8-metre copper shark and a three-metre, 300-kilogram shark

NOTE: The sharks never “attacked” or made any contact with the diver; they simply made threat displays.

SOURCE: Interview with Rory O'Connor.

CASE INVESTIGATOR: Marie Levine