

**ACTIVITY:** Surfing

**CASE GSAF 1992.04.09 / SA-403**

**DATE:** Thursday April 9, 1992

**LOCATION:** The incident took place in the Indian Ocean at Nahoon Corner, five kilometres northeast of the entrance to East London Harbour, Eastern Cape Province, South Africa.

32°59,4'S, 27°57,1'E



**NAME:** Gordon Harmer

**DESCRIPTION:** The surfer, a 35-year-old male, is 1,8 metres tall and weighs 75 kilograms. He was wearing black baggies, a black watch on his left wrist, a black and green bootie on his left foot with a black leash round his ankle.

**SURFBOARD:** The 'Screaming Blue' two-metre triffin had a white under-surface, a white and black upper-surface, and three black fins.

## **BACKGROUND**

**WEATHER:** The sky was clear and there was a light northeasterly breeze. Estimated air temperature was 32°C.

**MOON PHASE:** Waxing Crescent, 39% of the Moon was illuminated. First Quarter, April 10, 1992.

**SEA CONDITIONS:** The water was calm but the water was choppy and murky; underwater visibility was estimated to be one to 1,5 metres. A longshore channel was present close to shore and the East London Beach Office recorded sea surface temperature of 17°C.

**ENVIRONMENT:** Nahoon lies on the west bank of the Nahoon River, five kilometres north of the entrance to East London Harbour. The most popular beach in East London, Nahoon is renowned throughout the South African surfing community for producing some spectacular waves and is the venue of many national surfing competitions. No dolphins or fish were observed in the vicinity immediately preceding the incident.

**DISTANCE FROM SHORE:** 150 metres from shore and 300 metres from the rocky promontory which forms Nahoon Reef.

**DEPTH:** Two metres

**TIME:** 13h20

**NARRATIVE:** Forty people were in the water, but Gordon Harmer was separated from the crowd by 20 metres. He had been in the water for 30 minutes and was treading water, holding onto the right side of his board and facing seawards, when a shark grabbed his right knee and shook him for about five seconds. He grabbed the shark's gill slits with his hands and shook the shark. The shark released the surfer but became entangled in his leash and towed the surfboard for a metre before freeing itself and swimming away. Harmer shouted a warning to the other surfers and swimmers, and paddled to shore.

**INJURY:** It appears the shark merely mouthed the surfer. There were series of superficial lacerations and shallow puncture wounds in the surfer's lower right leg which formed two crescents; puncture marks on the antero-lateral aspect of the knee were caused by the

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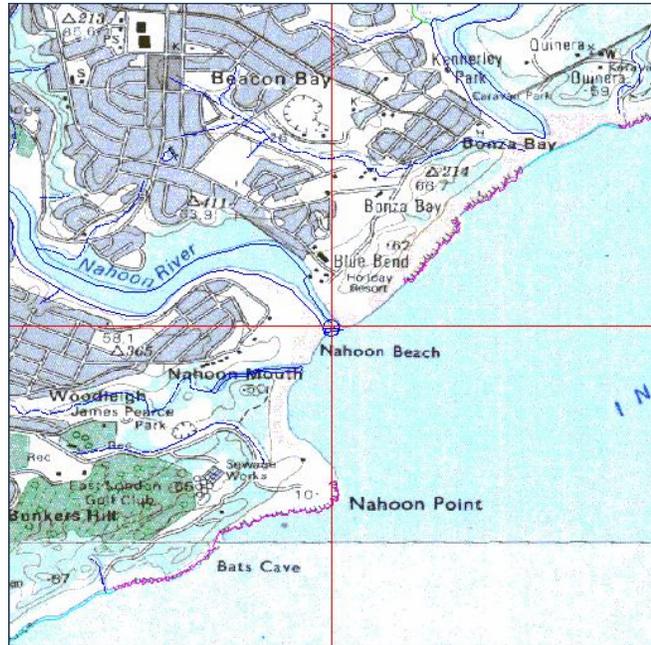
teeth of the upper jaw, and the lower jaw teeth avulsed tissue below the knee. In addition the surfer sustained a line of punctures on the palm of his left hand. Distances between punctures varied between 1,5 and 2,5 centimetres.

**FIRST AID / TREATMENT:** Lifeguards and a medical doctor administered first aid on the beach. Thirty minutes after the incident the surfer arrived by ambulance at Frere Hospital. Dr Albert Storm debrided and closed the wound on the medial aspect of the leg, but subsequent excision and reconstruction was necessary due to devitalization of tissue.

**SPECIES INVOLVED:** The wide interdentate spaces indicate that a shark in excess of two metres total length was involved. These wounds and the punctures around the patella suggest that the shark responsible had pointed rather than flattened teeth. The former have far less cutting ability. The puncture wounds suggest that the shark had pointed rather than flattened serrated teeth. A common shark in the area that has pointed teeth is the raggedtooth shark, *Carcharias taurus*. This species had been implicated in several incidents, all resulting in superficial injury. It is not regarded as an aggressive shark unless aroused by situations such as the spearing of fish. It has several rows of protruding teeth which would cause an irregular arrangement of puncture wounds. However the puncture on the hand form a single lines and those of the leg two distinct lines, thus no species identification was made.

**COMMENT:** This was Harmer's second encounter with a shark. In 1983 (GSAF 1983.00.00) he was riding a 1,8-metre white twinfin board at Queensberry Bay. At 08h00 the sky was sunny, a light southwesterly breeze was blowing and the sea was clear. No one was on the beach but five other surfers were in the water. Harmer had been surfing for 90 minutes. He rode a wave inshore and was paddling seaward. When he was about 50 metres from the beach a shark came up from below and struck the under-surface of his board – hard. The board shot upwards, but he stayed on the board and paddled hastily to the rocks. Harmer was uninjured, but the under-surface of his board was dented in the centre equidistant from the nose and tail.

In the present case, the wounds were surprisingly superficial considered that the shark's contact with Harmer was long enough to enable him to reach down and seize the shark's gill slits. Although he stuck his hands into the gill slits, there are no sharp gill rakers which could have inflicted the punctuate lacerations present. The wounds may have occurred when he reached down with an open hand to push the shark away. In so doing, his hand may have made contact with the shark's teeth, probably those of the lower jaw.



**CASE INVESTIGATORS:** Andrew Gifford, Shark Research Institute-South Africa and  
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