

ACTIVITY: Wading

CASE: **GSAF 2007.05.16**

DATE: Wednesday May 16, 2007

LOCATION: The incident took place in the Indian Ocean at Warra Beach, south of Coral Bay, Western Australia.

NAME: Becky Cooke

DESCRIPTION: She is a 38-year-old female from Ellenbrook (Perth) and a mother of five.

BACKGROUND

WEATHER: The sky was mostly sunny. Air temperature was 22.5°C, dew point 8.2°C, humidity 40%, sea level pressure 1015.3hPa, and wind direction was SSW at 11kt, with gusts to 16 kts.

MOON PHASE: New Moon.

ENVIRONMENT: Coral Bay, 1100km north of Perth, is a small settlement lying adjacent to Maud's Sanctuary Zone and is considered to be the best location to access the Ningaloo Reef. The beach is famous for its shallow, fringing corals and is popular with tourists visiting the Ningaloo Marine Park, which draws whale sharks, humpback whales, dolphins and dugongs.

In an interview from her hospital bed, Becky said they were collecting octopi and she mentioned using a gidge. The owner of a caravan park in Exmouth, Lyn Soter, says something must have aroused the interest of the shark and said some backpackers staying at his park have alleged there were fish bleeding in the water. "They were there and allegedly the person involved that was nipped on the heel, either her, or her party had been spear fishing," he said. "They had a gidge and they were towing some fish in the shallows, where she was wading back to shore."

DEPTH OF WATER: "Knee-deep" (i.e. 30 cm)

TIME: 14h30, and paramedics were called at 14h45 (WST).

NARRATIVE: According to press reports, Becky was wading across the reef with two of her children, 13-year-old Brandon and three-year-old Ethan. Brandon was walking nearby and Becky was carrying Ethan on her hip and holding a camera in her other hand. The shark approached from behind and bit the back of her lower left leg and heel. "I started hitting it with my camera and shaking my leg trying to get it off. At first I thought something had just hit me, not bitten me," said Becky. "It let go. I took a couple of steps and fell into the water



Becky Cooke with husband Peter and her five sons, Jacob, Hayden, Ethan, James and Brandon.

Photo by Stewart Allen

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because my leg was pretty bad. As I fell into the water the sea just turned to blood,” she said. Becky said she feared the shark might attack her children. “Brandon came running over. He had his gidge [spear] with him and I just said to him ‘take Ethan’ and he grabbed Ethan. I just said, ‘Here give me your gidge and you run back to the shore with your brother’. So I sat in the water while the guys came running over. I wasn’t sure if it was gone or if it was going to come back. I took my shirt off and wrapped it around my leg.”

INJURY: Although her injuries were not considered life-threatening, Becky sustained two deep lacerations on her left calf and lost most of the heel on her left foot. Ethan and Brandon were unharmed by the shark.

TREATMENT: Becky said she did not feel any pain until she reached the shore. She was given first aid, helped by her husband Peter Cooke, family friends and two volunteer conservation officers who turned up at the beach just moments before the incident. Mr. Cooke said he used his mobile phone to call for help. St. John's Ambulance manager Danny Barron said, “We were initially told it had done significant damage to her calf muscle.” Barron said Peter Cooke loaded his wife into the couple’s four-wheel drive vehicle and drove towards Coral Bay and they were met by an ambulance en route. Becky was treated at the Coral Bay nursing post before being sent via road to Carnarvon hospital. She was flown by air ambulance to Royal Perth Hospital where she was admitted for surgery and further treatment.

SPECIES: Peter Cooke saw the shark but was not able to identify it. He said the shark was about 2.5 metres in length.

NOTE: According to local divers the press reports that Becky had her baby in her arms and her teenage son next to her are untrue. “She was spearfishing and had dead fish floating around her. She knew she would get in trouble for fishing in a protected area, so she must have made the story up.” Commercial divers in the area say they have not been bothered by reef sharks.

SOURCES: The West Australian, May 16, 2007

PerthNow,

<http://www.news.com.au/perthnow/story/0,21598,21746568-2761,00.html>

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<http://www.skynews.com.au/story.asp?id=169577>

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<http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200705/s1927415.htm>

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