FOR THE LOVE OF SHARKS

Anti-culling protesters want to have their flake and eat it, too

BY RICHARD KING
On the morning of 6 November 2000, Ken Crew was finishing his regular swim off the popular, and usually placid, beach of North Cottesloe, a 500-metre stretch of sand in a well-to-do western suburb of Perth. It was around 6.30, and the 49-year-old Crew, a businessman and father of three, was wading in waist-deep water, when a 5-metre great white shark sped south along the beach, slicing through a crowd of bathers. According to witnesses, it went straight for Crew, whom it circled for several minutes before attacking. The shark tore off Crew’s right leg and then turned to face Dirk Avery, one of Crew’s friends. Avery mounted a reef, where the great white risked beaching itself if it continued to pursue him, and managed to fight it off. He escaped with deep cuts to his legs and feet. Crew, despite furious attempts to save him, died just minutes after the attack, in the arms of his friend Brian Morrison, a priest.

Grief and fear were still in the air when I arrived in Perth, from London, in 2001, and have never fully dissipated. In his recent memoir, Montebello, the novelist Robert Drewe revisits the events of that day and compares the aftermath to the mood that descends on a community when a murderer is on the loose. (This is the very metaphor pressed into service in Drewe’s first memoir, The Shark Net, which is set against the backdrop of the murders Eric Edgar Cooke committed in Perth in the late 1950s and early 1960s.) But despite the feelings of trepidation, few demands for revenge were forthcoming from the ocean-loving people of Perth. There was very little bloodlust that I can remember; rather, the predominant emotion was sorrow.

Thirteen years after Crew’s death, on 1 February 2014, a rather different combination of feelings was in evidence on Cottesloe beach. Certainly sorrow was in the mix, though the sorrow was reserved not for a man but for sharks, one of which – a 2-metre tiger – had been found dead on a hook that morning. But sorrow was not the principal emotion evinced on that extraordinary Saturday. The principal emotion was undoubtedly anger; specifically, it was anger at the men who have taken to the water in order to kill sharks and (especially) anger at the men who have charged them with the task.

The protesters were there to deplore the Western Australian government’s “shark mitigation” (or “catch and kill”) policy. Baited drum lines have been set in two “marine monitored” zones – one in the Perth metropolitan area and the other in the state’s south-west. The drum lines are comprised of a floating drum and two lines - the first attached to the sea floor, the second to a large baited hook - and are checked daily by commercial operatives in the south-west and by Department of Fisheries employees in Perth. They are designed to catch three breeds of shark: tigers, bulls and great whites (or white pointers). Hooked sharks of less than 3 metres are released; sharks of 3 metres or more are destroyed, and their remains disposed of at sea. At the time of the protest, only one full-sized shark - a 3-metre tiger - had been caught and killed. The shark was caught on Australia Day, off Meechup Beach near the south-west town of Dunsborough. Pulled to the surface by a commercial fisherman, it was shot four times with a .22 calibre rifle. The footage of this episode has been uploaded to YouTube and has done for the organisers of the shark-cull protest roughly what the Collateral Murder video did for WikiLeaks in 2010.

By any standard, but especially Perth’s standards, the anti-culling protests are massive. On 4 January around 4000 people descended on Cottesloe to protest against the policy; on 1 February it was more like 6000. Nor were these the usual suspects. Conservationists, animal-rights activists and Greens supporters were all there (the party’s leader, Christine Milne, made a speech), but most of the protesters looked urbane. On any other Saturday, many of them, I’m sure, would be sipping flat whites in one of Cottesloe’s overpriced cafes, or power walking along Marine Parade. And yet there they were, under placards that read “S.O.S. – Save Our Sharks”, “Great Whites Have Rights” and “Stop Cullin’ Barnett”. (This last is a play on the name of WA’s Liberal premier, Colin Barnett.) True, the protest had the hint of a party: foam fins and shark suits aren’t exactly solemn, and most of the people I’ve spoken to are appalled at the threats of violence made against fishermen and their families. But the depth of feeling is unmistakable. The shark cull is a cause célèbre.

Precisely why this issue has gripped the collective imagination is a difficult question to answer. Some discern – or claim to discern (one must allow for political point-scoring) – an expression of dissatisfaction with the WA government more generally. Barnett isn’t popular at the moment, and many in WA share the suspicion that the premier is attempting to give himself a lift in the polls by getting tough on sharks. (Barnett, who is the state member for Cottesloe, rather invited this charge in late December by posing with a mighty hook and chain and a very unbecoming grin.) But this doesn’t explain the strength of feeling in other parts of Australia, nor in other parts of the world. On 1 February there were demonstrations not just in Perth but also across the country. There was also a demonstration in New Zealand, where the cuts to the WA education budget are, presumably, a minority interest. As for South Africa, where a crowd of 200 anti-cull protesters confronted Barnett on
5 February (he was in Cape Town to address a mining conference), I'm no expert but I understand that country's voters have a few public funding issues of their own.

One view that many of the protesters share is that the “catch and kill” policy is an overreaction. Although WA has seen a significant spike in shark-related incidents – seven people have been killed in the past three years, making WA, for the moment at least, the deadliest place in the world for shark attacks – the chances of being bitten by a shark are still fantastically low. The “more people die from” formulation has been rife these past weeks, and the comparisons have grown increasingly picturesque. It is not unhelpful to be told that more people die from drowning than from shark bites, if only because it is good to be reminded that the ocean is a dangerous place. But when shark-related deaths are compared unfavourably (or should that be favourably) to bee-related deaths, the suspicion that we are being invited to compare an apple with an orange is difficult to suppress. (In Monte Carlo, Drew makes the point that while most people are not allergic to bee stings, everyone is “highly allergic to shark bites”). Other favoured culprits include snakebites, car accidents, hot dogs and falling coconuts, while the managing director of Sea Shepherd Australia, Jeff Hansen, informs us that last year eight people died from
lightning strikes while playing golf in the United States. But surely the laurel must go to Mimi Bekhechi, the associate director of the animal welfare group PETA, or People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. “According to the Discovery Channel’s Shark Week website,” writes Bekhechi in the UK Independent, “you’re more likely to be bitten by another person than by a shark.” Even without that august citation, this would be hard to deny.

The purpose of such Twitter-friendly pronouncements is to suggest that the WA premier has vastly overstated the problem. But others involved in the anti-cull protests have focused on the content of the government’s response. Some have suggested that baited drum lines may increase the danger of attacks by attracting sharks to the monitored areas, while others prefer to stress the alternatives, which range from such prosaic arrangements as beach patrols and spotter aircraft to state-of-the-art solutions such as camouflage wetsuits, which reduce the visibility of swimmers, and electronic shark deterrents, which play havoc with sharks’ electrical receptors. Most in the scientific community, including the UWA Oceans Institute, tend to focus on the need for more research into shark behaviour and biology, and into the visual cues and vibrations that may lead sharks to attack human beings. They argue that, as apex predators - predators with no natural predators themselves - sharks are essential for the ocean’s health, and that, as slow growers and infrequent breeders, they are vulnerable to population collapse. Many conservationists make the point that the “catch and kill” policy is inconsistent with the federal government’s white shark recovery plan, and that the decision by the federal environment minister, Greg Hunt, to grant a temporary exemption from laws protecting great whites is an ecological calamity in the making.

However, a scientist in favour of a non-lethal solution to the recent spate of shark attacks is not the same thing as a scientist who says that the use of drum lines is ineffective - a point apparently lost on those protesters who are eager to paint the WA government’s “shark mitigation policy” as unscientific. To be sure, there is a certain amount of bad faith on both sides of this debate, as shown by an outbreak of euphemisms (see, for example, the preceding sentence) and the tendency to be selective with the evidence. To take one conspicuous instance of the latter: there seems to be an iron law operating that those who are against the policy will refer in detail to a program of shark culling in Hawaii in the 1960s and 1970s, in which period nearly 5000 sharks were killed and no discernable decrease in shark attacks was recorded, and ignore entirely the experience of Queensland, where drum lines have been used since 1962 (admittedly, in combination with shark nets) and where shark attacks are a thing of the past. Conversely, those who are for the policy
will refer to Queensland and ignore Hawaii. Clearly there is more to the shark-cull debate than an honest disagreement over policy.

I put this point to Peter Whish-Wilson, a Greens senator for Tasmania, who grew up in Perth. He told me that while he was unconvinced (to say the least) of the need for a cull, he would still be opposed to it if it were shown to be effective. Such frankness is both impressive and refreshing. For Whish-Wilson, and for many others, the shark-cull debate is a moral debate that has to do with humankind’s ongoing exploitation of nature. More specifically, it has to do with our failure, or reluctance, to rethink our relationship with nature, or rather to recognise that we are a part of nature, not its divinely appointed overlords. The case was expressed most pithily by British comedian Ricky Gervais, who took to Twitter to make his point: “You can kill any shark that gets out of the sea and starts killing us in our natural habitat of streets and pubs and internet cafes. Deal?”

To this extent, the anti-cull protest has a much wider resonance than is immediately apparent. It is mapped in to an emerging ecological consciousness – one that owes as much to David Attenborough as to Jeff Hansen and his chums. One of the most striking aspects of the protests so far, and of the commentary surrounding them, has been the way in which sharks have been subtly “rebranded”. The shark is no longer the careering yobbo of nature; it is a creature with its own integrity, even its own dignity. (As Whish-Wilson puts it, “There is beauty in the beast.”) And while this consciousness did not emerge overnight – I note in passing that even the Jaws movie franchise displays a distinct “softening” of attitude towards the shark over the course of its four films – it does seem, these past weeks, to have entered a new phase. Animal welfare activists used to say that the shark was trying to eat us, not kill us. It was a good line, but even this defence is putting it a bit strongly. Most shark “attacks” are cases of mistaken identity: human beings are generally not fatty enough to be worth the average shark’s time and effort. It seems that many shark-related deaths are the result of so-called exploratory bites: sharks are naturally inquisitive and will munch on something that arouses their interest. This isn’t much compensation for the surfer who loses a leg, but it does rather alter our view of the fish.

Still, there is fear, and the fear is natural. The more intelligent commentators recognise this, and recognise, too, that humans are hardwired to “overreact” to certain threats, the avoidance of which was essential to our survival as a species over hundreds of thousands of years. The point is an important one to make, for there is a deep, albeit narrow, vein of misanthropy in the shark-cull debate, and in green politics more generally, that is as unattractive as it is wrongheaded. In a piece written for the Sydney Morning Herald, Tim Winton gives a good example of the tendency, together with his own version of the "more people die from" formulation:

Sharks are not machines. They are not invincible. They are not cruel – certainly not as cruel as a 14-year-old with a Twitter account, or a backroom politician with a grudge. Unlike humans, sharks are not capable of moral evil ... The ugliest utterances seem to come from those at a distance, often citizens who rarely get their hair wet, whose hatred is implacable. Usually blokes, I’m sorry to say. Men, of course, are far more likely to die on the toilet than from a shark encounter, but some blokes still want to see every last shark dead before their last straining moment.

For a novelist of Winton’s talents to stoop to such a caricature will come as a surprise to many readers. (Who are these emperored shark-haters?) But the key point is political, not aesthetic: in promoting the shark from beast to beauty, it is important not to demote human beings from masters of the universe to spiteful monsters.

Happily, such misanthropy is only a fringe pursuit at present. So what explains the anger of the protesters? My feeling is that some of it stems from a sentimental attitude towards the shark – that the shark, having been so thoroughly rehabilitated, now finds itself the unwitting captive of a different kind of anthropomorphism. Many have expressed some bemusement at this; Robert Drewes, who is no fan of the cull (in an email he describes it as “fanciful and cruel”), is nevertheless intrigued to find that “this frighteningly efficient killing machine [has been] sentimentally transformed into the new dolphin”. But perhaps this development is not so strange. In recent decades, we’ve seen a new kind of politics: a politics of easy indignation in which our feelings are given special prominence. (The late Robert Hughes was early on this point. “The emphasis is on the subjective: how we feel about things, rather than what we think or can know,” he wrote in 1993.)

Since sentimentality can be usefully defined as the tendency to be as interested in one’s own feelings as one is in the ostensible objects of them, it is not hard to see how issues like the shark cull may come to dominate the political terrain. In the three years after I left the UK, one of the biggest issues there was fox-hunting. The British people decided they didn’t care for it, and the Labour government, always eager to demonstrate that they liked new
things much more than old things, obliged them with the Hunting Act 2004, which makes it illegal to hunt foxes with hounds. The Act doesn’t make it illegal to hunt foxes, so it’s doubtful the foxes cared very much. But the protesters had shown that they cared, and so they moved on. Thus we come to another danger surrounding the shark-cull protests: that this potentially “representative” issue may morph into nothing more than a bit of politics for the apolitical—a chance to shed a few tears on TV. For this reason, it is essential that the protest organisers attempt to make the link between sharks and the environment more generally, and do not attempt merely to ride the wave of watery public sentiment. Needless to say, Jeff Hansen’s description of sharks as “our Australian battlers that work tirelessly to maintain the balance in our oceans” is a pretty pitiful start.

This is not to claim that the anti-cull protesters are insincere. I’ve been struck by the debate that has opened up in the surfing community in particular, and by the feeling of a significant section of that community that the WA government is out of its depth, or at any rate out of its element. For them, the threat of sharks is analogous to the threat of avalanches in mountaineering: it comes, so to say, with the territory. David Whish-Wilson—the brother of Peter, and the author of a recent history of Perth—makes the point with characteristic grace:

An old fisherman told an aunt of mine in the 60s to avoid swimming in the ocean at dawn and dusk, and during the latter months of the year, especially on “double-grey days”, when both the sky and sea are grey. Everybody who spends a lot of time under the water, or riding waves along the WA coastline develops a healthy respect for the ocean; its different moods and of course its dangers. Particularly when you’re underwater, an awareness of the presence of sharks is part of the deep texture of the experience. For all its beauty, the ocean isn’t a benign environment, and like it or not, in the ocean we aren’t top of the food chain. You accept this or stay out of the water.

A sober thought, soberly expressed—and one that seems to chime, for me, with the most impressive placard at the protest. It wasn’t the sexiest slogan on the beach; it didn’t inspire any chants. But amid the calls for a cull of politicians, the cloying pleas to save “our” sharks, the cutest hand puppets and great-white costumes, it stood out for its simplicity: “Sharks are more important than human recreation.”