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Where are the bull sharks in Sydney?

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Bull sharks are more common in Sydney's waterways than most people know - or probably want to think about.

Improving water quality and the resulting increase in bait fish stocks may be leading to an increase in visits of the large marine animals. Or perhaps we are better able to detect them.

Should you want to go searching for a bull shark, the best spot to see one is at the mouth of Sydney Harbour.

Over the past 21 months, about 554 sightings have been recorded between North and South Head - or not far short of one a day, according to data gathered by the Integrated Marine Observing System, sourced from agencies such as the CSIRO.

Garden Island came second with 356 sightings.

The prevalence of bull sharks is of interest not just to people living on coastal fringes but also those well inland - sometimes thousands of kilometres from the sea - given the ease with which bull sharks cope with fresh and salty water.

Not surprisingly then, bull sharks have been found venturing up as far as Wentworth Point in Sydney's west.

Parramatta River features in the sighting locations, while areas such as Manns Point on Sydney's lower north shore had 240 sightings and Hen and Chicken Bay in the inner west clocked 185 over the period.

Number of bull shark sightings from March 2016 - December 2017

While shark-human interactions are relatively uncommon - despite the media hype about shark attacks - authorities identify bull sharks along with great whites and tiger sharks as marine creatures to steer clear of.

Avoidance is not always an option, though, as bull sharks have been known to use inland rivers as nursing grounds for their pups.

Bulls spotted close to the coast or on inner waters are more likely than not to be juveniles, and are those caught most often by fishermen. Unlike species such as whalers and wobbegongs, bull sharks are not categorised as vulnerable and not protected.

Still, these areas may also be home to large, pregnant females that need to eat more to sustain themselves.

As rivers are often clouded by sediment, there is an increased risk that a human may be mistaken for prey in this low-visibility environment, although sight is typically the weakest of the senses they use to detect and pursue a prospective meal.

Two mates caught this large bull shark at the Georges River in Revesby. *Photo: Facebook*

Last week, two fisherman caught a bull shark in the Georges River.

Weighing up the risk of a shark-human interaction comes as the Paramatta River Catchment Group seeks to make designated spots on the river "swimmable" again after heavy pollution in the 20th century.

"We would be doing a full risk assessment of the site," Mark Drury, a group spokesman, said.

"You could put up shark nets ... the Dawn Fraser Baths in the east of the river is already doing that.

"I think most Sydneysiders are aware there's bull sharks in the harbour."

A NSW Department of Primary Industries spokesman said the agency did not expect there would be an increase in shark-human interactions in Sydney's rivers and estuaries.

"Shark bites are rare events and thousands of people use our rivers and estuaries on any given day," he said.

"While there is no 100 per cent safeguard against sharks, our advice to water users in rivers and estuaries is to be shark smart," he said, referring to a DPI app that sends alerts if tagged sharks - monitored through the department's shark monitoring plan - approach beacons set up near popular beaches or waterways.

NSWDPI advise 2.92m Bull Shark tagged and released at NIELSENS PARK (SHARK BAY), Woollahra at 10:45pm on 22 Jan 2018.

— SharkSmart (@NSWSharkSmart) January 22, 2018

The last confirmed bull shark attack in Sydney Harbour occurred in 2009, when navy diver Paul de Gelding was attacked at Woolloomooloo Bay, losing his right leg and hand.

The map data was sourced from the Animal Tracking Database (<https://animaltracking.aodn.org.au>) of the Integrated Marine Observing System (IMOS, www.imos.org.au) - IMOS is a national collaborative research infrastructure, supported by the Australian government.

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/environment/animals/where-are-the-bull-sharks-in-sydney-20180124-h0nf9n.html>

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