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"Changes in Media Portrayal of Human-wildlife Conflict During Successive Fatal Shark Bites"

Sabatier, Etienne and Charlie Huveneers

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Encounters between humans and wildlife that result in human fatalities can generate public anxiety and increase pressure on conservation managers and governments for risk mitigation. Low probability-high consequence events such as shark bites on humans attract substantial media attention for short time periods, but how the media react when several of these rare but fatal events occur in quick succession has seldom been subject to quantitative analysis. Understanding media portrayal of such encounters is important because it both reflects and influences public perceptions of risks, mitigation measures, and conservation policies. This study examined media portrayals of sharks between 2011 and 2013 in the state of Western Australia during which six shark bites resulting in fatalities occurred. We analysed 361 shark-related articles published in major Western Australian newspapers over 26 months to trace changes in media reporting about sharks prior to, during, and after the six fatalities. The findings indicate that when rare, but fatal human-wildlife events occur in quick succession, negative framing by media of wildlife behaviour and threats can exaggerate public anxiety about the pervasive presence of wildlife predators and high risk of human fatalities. The study highlights the need for government agencies and conservation scientists to better engage with media to provide accurate and effective information and advice to swimmers and surfers about shark ecology and behaviour. (Text from authors' abstract)

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