

HUMAN-WILDLIFE CONFLICT & COEXISTENCE  
/ CASE STUDIES

# PROVIDING COMMUNITY SUPPORT AFTER TRAUMATIC INCIDENTS





## INTRODUCTION

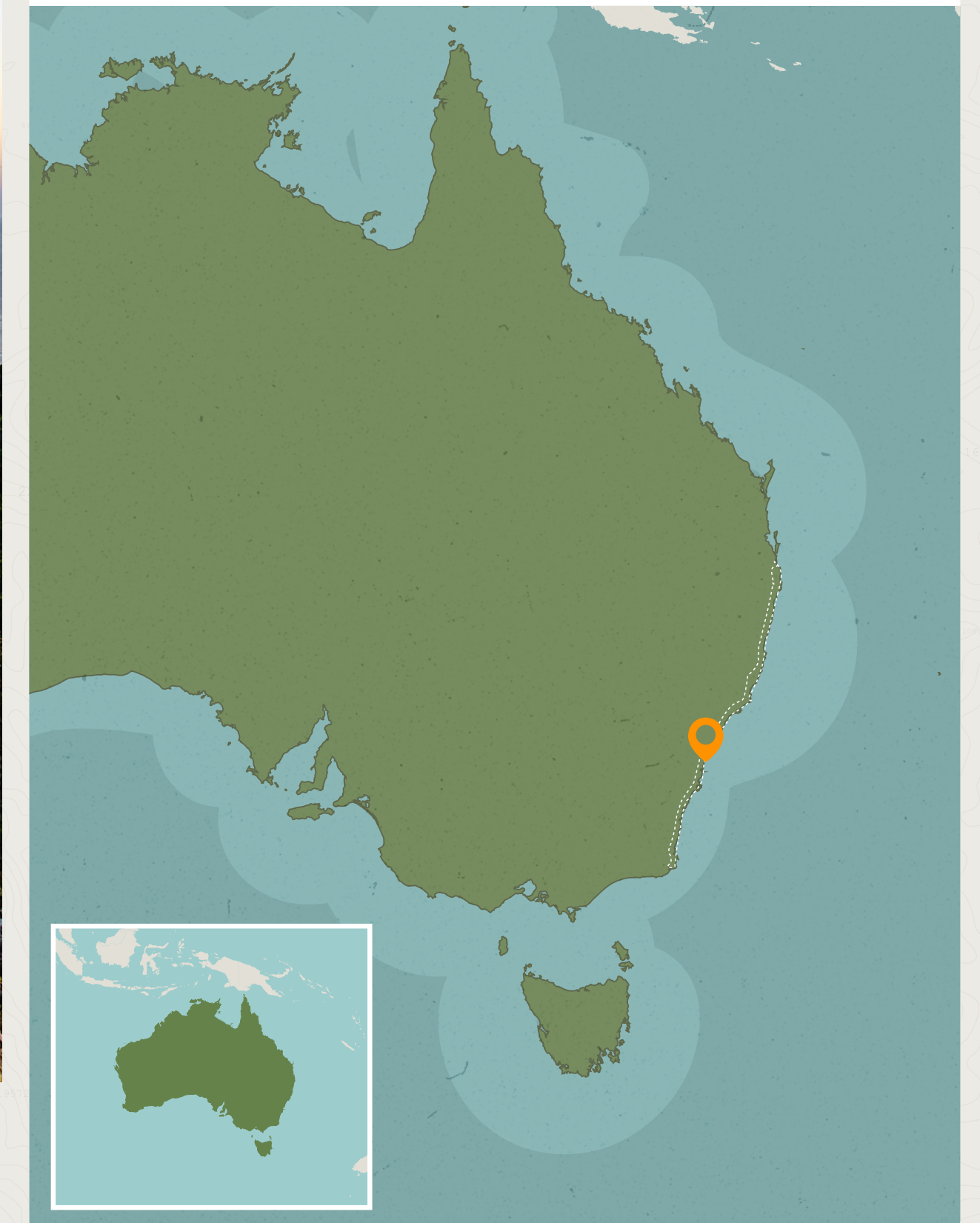
Between 2013-2016, a series of shark-human interactions occurred on the coast of New South Wales (NSW), Australia, that led to a number of surfer fatalities. This situation triggered significant community concern, attracting international media attention and calls for shark culling.

In 2015, the NSW Government commissioned an independent review, led by Cardno, an environmental consulting services company, to investigate new and emerging technologies to mitigate shark-human interactions. This review was followed by a stakeholder summit held at Taronga Zoo in Sydney, and included shark experts from across the globe, to determine the technologies to be trialled in NSW waters. This led the NSW Government to develop the NSW Shark Management Strategy (SMS), 2015-2020.

**THE SMS AIMED TO INCREASE THE PROTECTION OF BEACHGOERS FROM SHARKS, WHILE MINIMISING HARM TO TARGET SHARKS (WHITE CARCHARODON CARCHARIAS, BULL CARCHARHINUS LEUCAS AND TIGER GALEOCERDO CUVIER) AND OTHER MARINE ANIMALS.**



## NEW SOUTH WALES, AUSTRALIA



# NEW SOUTH WALES AUSTRALIA



**KEY INSIGHTS &  
LESSONS LEARNT**  
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Prior to the Shark Management Strategy (SMS), the NSW Government responded to serious and fatal shark incidents solely in accordance with its Shark Incident Response Plan, whereby the focus was to catch and euthanise the shark thought responsible for the incident. The SMS, however, saw a shift to catch, tag and release sharks from the area of the incident. It also provided an opportunity to focus more on the human part of the shark-human interaction through research and the establishment of a dedicated community and stakeholder engagement team, and a process by which that team could support those affected by shark incidents. This case study will focus on the development of the community engagement team and the process that takes place after a serious or fatal shark incident in NSW.

## SETTING THE SCENE

Shark nets were first deployed on the NSW coast in 1937, as a public safety measure in an effort to reduce the risk of shark bites. They are still deployed each swimming season, from September to April, at 51 beaches between Newcastle and Wollongong.

## SHARK NETS CAN RESULT IN THE DEATH OF BOTH TARGET AND NON-TARGET MARINE ANIMALS, INCLUDING THREATENED, ENDANGERED AND PROTECTED SPECIES.

With increased media and government reporting, there had been a shift in community sentiment, and the support of lethal control measures for shark mitigation declined. To address this, the SMS was developed to trial new and emerging technologies for shark mitigation while simultaneously learning more about shark movements and ecology.



In October 2015, the NSW Government implemented the SMS, managed by the NSW Department of Primary Industries (DPI). One of the main activities commenced was to test and trial different technologies to increase protection for people, including the use of Shark-Management-Alert-in-Real-Time (SMART) drumlines, aerial surveillance (drones and helicopters), sonar technology, barriers and personal protection devices, while also gathering feedback on these technologies from coastal councils and communities. The SMS also included a shark tagging program to learn more about the movements of target sharks and a comprehensive community engagement and social research program.

As sharks were seen to impact local economics following shark incidents and pose a threat to the safety of people in NSW, conflict ensued around what should be done to remedy the situation.

## THE CONFLICT BETWEEN PEOPLE (ENVIRONMENTALISTS, SURFERS, FISHERS, BUSINESSES AND TOURISM OPERATORS) ABOUT THE 'SHARK PROBLEM' WAS COMPLEX DUE TO THE TRAUMATIC NATURE AND NUMBER OF INCIDENTS, DIFFERENT COMMUNITY ATTITUDES AND VALUES, AND UNDERLYING SOCIAL ISSUES.

To address this conflict, the community engagement team established as part of the SMS (hereafter "the team"), focused on understanding and addressing human needs, ensuring members of the community had a fair and equitable process to share their views, providing relevant and localised science education and building strong relationships. It was through the process of building these strong relationships and listening to community needs that the team learned about the significant trauma that impacts communities after a shark incident.



## ANALYSIS

Initially, the team's role was: to be present in the community; to coordinate a local stakeholder advisory group; learn about the community's needs and desires; communicate the Government's actions on the SMS implementation; determine levels of support for shark mitigation; and learn about issues that were potentially creating more conflict within and between coastal communities. The team made a particular effort to engage with people who were directly impacted by shark incidents, including local surfers and lifesavers and a shark attack survivor support group called Bite Club.

**BY LISTENING AND LEARNING FROM THESE GROUPS, IT BECAME APPARENT THAT THERE WAS OFTEN A LOT OF UNADDRESSED TRAUMA IN COMMUNITIES WHERE SHARK INCIDENTS HAVE OCCURRED.**



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To better understand some of that trauma, DPI funded a joint study between the Bite Club and the University of Sydney, *The Direct and Psychological Impacts of Shark Bite Events* (Taylor et al 2018), which details the significant impact the media has on shark bite survivors and risk of people developing post traumatic stress disorder after a shark incident. It became clear that the mental health impacts were significant, specifically for people who may have been directly impacted, such as the victims themselves, families and friends of victims, people who bravely rendered assistance during the shark incident, witnesses, first aid responders, lifesavers and other beachgoers and the wider community in general.

**AS THE SMS WAS NOT DESIGNED NOR EQUIPPED TO ADDRESS THIS TRAUMA, THE TEAM SET OUT TO FIND A PARTNER WITH THIS EXPERTISE TO CO-DEVELOP A PROGRAM WITH A SPECIFIC FOCUS ON PROVIDING MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT TO COASTAL COMMUNITIES AFTER A SERIOUS OR FATAL SHARK INCIDENT.**



## SETTING UP A COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PROGRAM

Before initiating the new Shark Incident Community Support Program in 2021 (hereafter “the program”), DPI had invested years of dedicated community engagement and social research to listen to, and understand, the NSW coastal communities’ views on sharks. To date, over 29 894 people from NSW (and interstate) have contributed to over 22 social research studies. DPI has also formed strong relationships with key stakeholders who have become partners of the program including the 25 Coastal Councils in NSW, Surf Life Saving NSW (who equip, empower, develop and support volunteer lifesavers and paid lifeguards to deliver aquatic rescue and safety services), Surfing NSW (the peak competitive boardriding body in the state) and the Bite Club (shark attack survivor support group).

**TRUST HAD BEEN BUILT WITH THESE ORGANISATIONS, AFTER MANY YEARS OF WORKING TOGETHER. HOWEVER, ALL PARTIES RECOGNISED THEY WERE NOT FORMALLY QUALIFIED TO BE DEALING WITH THE TRAUMA AND MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES AFTER A SHARK INCIDENT.**



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Following bushfire and flooding events, DPI was introduced to the Rural Adversity Mental Health Program (RAMHP). RAMHP employs a number of coordinators who respond in times of natural disasters and severe adversity, link rural people to local mental health services and resources, and provide education to workplaces and communities about mental health across regional, rural and remote NSW. Although beaches are not usually in the 'rural' purview of RAMHP, it was acknowledged that most shark incidents occur outside of the major centres such as Sydney, Wollongong and Newcastle, and that most impacts were felt in smaller regional communities. In addition, with the focus being on the mental health support that could only be delivered by RAMHP, they became a critical partner of the program.





## ACTIVITIES

When a fatal or serious shark incident occurs, the first thing the program does is contact all the partners to let them know what has happened. This occurs immediately, so that partners hear the facts before the media reports. All the partners meet to plan the community engagement event (hereafter “the event”). The DPI community engagement team contacts the local council leadership team to offer support to the community by offering an event comprising community information sessions or drop-in stands in collaboration with the other program partners.

**DURING THIS PREPARATION PHASE, THE PROGRAM PARTNERS MEET WITH SOME OF THE LOCALS IN THE COMMUNITY TO CONDUCT A SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS TO UNDERSTAND THE LOCAL CONTEXT AND IDENTIFY THE MOST APPROPRIATE EVENT APPROACH, TIME AND LOCATION.**

The local community and council are key to helping promote the event/s to locals. The event/s might take place in a local meeting room, a surf club, or a local beach, with final plans decided in collaboration with the local council and interested parties. While there is a general framework for the event approach, a key strength is its flexibility, and every event is specifically tailored to meet the needs of the local community, and that includes changing and adapting the approach during an event if required.



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The event/s allow the community to talk to the different groups face-to-face in an informal setting. After a shark incident, people are genuinely curious to learn more about sharks and shark mitigation technologies. Information and facts can reduce fear following a disaster so DPI is available to provide this information. RAMHP coordinators provide mental health education and trauma information to make communities aware of signs indicating a person may be having difficulty recovering after the event, and links them to services which can support a person's mental health. Members of the Bite Club work alongside RAMHP to share their unique lived experience and offer peer-to-peer support services to help community members recover and look to move 'Beyond the Bite' (this is the name of the Bite Club's recovery program). Surfing NSW provides information about their first aid and trauma training courses so that ocean users can gain skills that could save a life and know how to respond if a shark incident occurs in the future. Surf Life Saving NSW can provide localised beach safety information, such as local drone surveillance reports. The local council is often present as well to provide other localised information and present a united government front.



**ALL THE PARTNERS COME TOGETHER TO HELP SUPPORT THE COMMUNITY AFTER THE INCIDENT AND PROVIDE A PLATFORM FOR THE COMMUNITY TO SHARE AND EXPRESS THEIR GRIEF AND PROVIDE CONDOLENCES IN THE CASE OF A FATALITY.**

After the event/s, attendees are provided with a feedback form and can indicate whether they would like any further mental health support.



## OUTCOMES

As of April 2023, the Shark Incident Community Support Program has been rolled out after three shark incidents in Forster (May 2021), Coffs Harbour (September 2021) and Sydney (February 2022). Locations and approaches of the events have varied from presentations at local surf clubs to drop-in stands on local beaches. The program has also provided events for specific groups at their request. For instance, on two occasions, after surfers have been tragically killed, the local boardrider clubs have requested that an event be held at their local venue, specifically for surfers and separate from the general community session.

This program has received positive feedback from the local councils and communities regarding the events. As noted in the lessons learnt, quantifying the attendance and mental health outcomes of these kind of events was difficult. An estimated number of around 375 people attended these events and 31 were connected to further mental health support. Members of the Bite Club continue to connect and support many individuals from all of these communities.

**WHEN IT COMES TO ADDRESSING THE COMPLEX ISSUE OF SHARK INCIDENTS, DPI'S ENGAGEMENT APPROACH, INCLUDING THIS NEW COMMUNITY SUPPORT PROGRAM FOLLOWING A SHARK INCIDENT HAS PROVEN TO BE AS IMPORTANT AS PURSUING TECHNICAL SOLUTIONS TO PREVENTING THEM IN THE FIRST PLACE.**



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## KEY INSIGHTS & LESSONS LEARNT

### 01 | INTANGIBLE IMPACTS

Initially, it was hard for the program to receive support to hold these events, until the team secured the right partner to take the lead on providing mental health support. As the outcomes are often qualitative and hard to evaluate, the team provided feedback from councils, communities and partners to senior government members, after which the importance of these events was further elevated. The aim now is to make this program a formal part of the existing Shark Incident Response Plan.

### 02 | IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGE

The team is very conscious of the language it uses after a shark incident. Through discussions with the Bite Club members, most of whom insist that it be referred to as a 'shark attack', it became apparent that the people who are impacted should choose how they describe the incident, i.e., whether it's a shark attack, a shark bite, a shark-human interaction or a shark incident. It is important to respect the language used by and the emotive state of the impacted stakeholder, and to acknowledge that there is no 'right or wrong' way to describe it.

### 03 | DIVERSE TEAM

By collaborating with the diverse groups/partners, each partner could focus on their areas of expertise or signpost the impacted stakeholder to the relevant partner. For instance, staff from the DPI provide information on sharks and shark mitigation measures, while staff from RAMHP provide advice and signposting on mental health and trauma.

### 04 | MONITORING AND EVALUATION

Determining the impact of such engagements can be tricky, especially when the events can evoke many emotions, and the program did not feel it was appropriate to conduct detailed surveys before and after the event. However, it would still monitor the success through feedback from the councils and communities and whether engaged attendees followed up with the signposting or requested further support.

### 05 | NEUTRALITY

Although the DPI presented the science in a way relevant to the communities, they primarily took the role of listening to the communities and remaining neutral. If the communities felt that the Department was taking a particular side or had a specific agenda, conflict could likely escalate.

### 06 | FACE-TO-FACE ENGAGEMENT

Having a physical presence after a shark incident and being able to answer and discuss concerns with the community face-to-face was very powerful and built a lot of trust in the community. The team learned that 'showing up' in hard times matters.

### 07 | PLANNING MEETINGS

The program took time to design stakeholder events. Before bringing stakeholders together, they conducted one-on-one conciliation processes to determine what each stakeholder group wanted to achieve from the events. On one occasion, the community asked for no media to be present, so the team had to pass this request on to attending journalists. These events were designed to be impactful, but also safe spaces.

### 08 | FEEDBACK

As the program had to be reactive, it was hard to assess when the best time was to engage with the community after the incident. Therefore, having conducted the response after the first three shark incidents, the program always informally requested feedback from the community to determine whether it was the right time to hold the event or the topic of discussion was appropriate. It was determined holding event/s two weeks post incident was appropriate to give the community enough time to process and grieve, if needed, but also timely to answer any questions. The trust between the implementing partners also meant they could provide feedback to each other regarding how the event had gone.

### 09 | CONTINUOUS LEARNING AND FLEXIBILITY

Through engagements with the community after a shark incident, the program has further identified how they can support the community. From providing better support to parents on how to discuss sharks with their children, to understanding the role traditional owners and leaders can play in helping communities heal, and how to cope better when wildlife takes a life. This program is continually adapting and evolving through a continuous feedback cycle of implementation, reflection and adaptation.

### 10 | SEEK THE LOCAL CONTEXT

When conducting any engagement with the local communities, the program actively examines the local context of the situation and spends a lot of time listening to the community's concerns and thoughts on mental health, sharks, shark incidents and shark mitigation.



## FURTHER INFORMATION

- Direct and indirect psychological impacts of shark bite events, Australia and New Zealand. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*. 2018
- NSW DPI Shark Management Program
- NSW SharkSmart Instagram
- Rural Adversity Mental Health Program
- Surfing NSW
- Bite Club & Beyond The Bite
- Surf Life Saving NSW

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## ABOUT THE CASE STUDIES

The **Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO)** and the **IUCN SSC Human-Wildlife Conflict & Coexistence Specialist Group (HWCCSG)** have jointly developed a set of case studies with the aim of covering the process projects have taken to manage various aspects of a human-wildlife conflict & coexistence situation. This case study is one of many that will be used to illustrate key components of the **IUCN SSC Guidelines on Human-Wildlife Conflict & Coexistence**. The published case studies can be found in the **Human-Wildlife Conflict & Coexistence Library**.

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Contact:  
Forestry Division – Wildlife and Protected Areas Management  
<http://www.fao.org/forestry/wildlife>  
**Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations**  
Rome, Italy



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