

## A Voice For The Sharks



Jill Ocone

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**M**elissa Michaelson knows a thing or two about sharks.

And she's got a passion for shark advocacy.

Sharks are a hot media topic, fueled in part by the success of the Discovery Channel's yearly *Shark Week* series. It comes as no surprise that when a shark swims close to shore during the summer, social media spreads the word in seconds. Consequently, many people are led to believe rumors and untruths about sharks, resulting in a fear of creatures that, in reality, pose little threat to humans.

Michaelson dedicates herself to educating others about shark truths versus what might be assumed from media hype and false reports. The Bricktown resident and Point Pleasant native grew up swimming in the Atlantic Ocean with no fear of sharks, and only when her family relocated to south Florida did she realize just how magnificent sharks are. "My stepfather was an avid diver and had experience in handling sharks. I was about ten when he taught me for the first time how to catch and handle small sharks by hand," Michaelson said. She spent

so much time handling nurse sharks and touching other marine life that oftentimes she would have to submerge her hands in water to relieve the itching and burning. However, her curiosity for sharks and other marine life only increased with each and every encounter, and her interest was worth more to her than the physical irritation she experienced.

"I would often see sharks while snorkeling," she explained, "and a majority of the time they would disappear as soon as they were aware of my presence. It was nothing like what I see on *Shark Week* today."

Her most memorable moment was an encounter with two hammerheads that slowly swam by her and her brother as they were catching spiny lobsters in grass beds. "To see those majestic animals in their natural setting with all their grace and agility was beyond moving to the soul," she said.

Fast forward twenty years, long after Michaelson relocated back to New Jersey, when her interest in sharks peaked again. She began to educate herself about sharks by reading research papers and through social media. "I realized there was this whole world on social media dedicated to advocating for and researching sharks," she said. "I learned about the perils sharks face, along with so many other marine species."

The more Michaelson learned, the more vested she became in the idea of advocating for sharks and educating the public about shark awareness. "Sharks carry an unwarranted stigma and misconception of fear created by the media and by motion pictures," she explained. "The fact is, you are more likely to get into an accident on your way to the shore than having a negative shark encounter."

She is quick to point out that sharks can be dangerous in certain settings because they are considered to be apex predators. "I would never recommend anyone engage these animals in the wild without trained professionals or a lot of personal experience," Michaelson clarified.

According to Michaelson, in reality, sharks pose very little risk to human life when compared with all of the other risks one might take by simply getting to the beach. For instance, she referenced a September 2015 article from The Weather Channel that focused on how more people died from taking selfies than from shark attacks in 2015 from January through September.

Sharks do not have a voice, and Michaelson is one of many who are the voice for sharks. She uses social media to educate and engage the public through forums and posts. Her passion and knowledge has led her to be a contributor to research

and documentary films, as well as an educator for anglers on species identification and proper handling techniques. She also volunteers for the Marine Conservation Science Institute, White Shark Advocacy, and White Shark Interest.

Michaelson's personal hobby is following the white shark pups that are caught off the coasts of both New Jersey and New York each year. "We have a white shark nursery here. It was documented back in the 1970s and 80s by researcher Jack Casey off Sandy Hook, New Jersey," she said.

On August 25, 2015, the first white shark pup to be satellite tagged was caught and released several miles offshore of New York, which was an exciting event for shark advocates like Michaelson. "It will be interesting to read in the future what they learn from the data obtained from her tag," she said. With the help of local anglers, Michaelson has been documenting her own research of white sharks caught and released off the New Jersey coast since 2003. The numbers have been increasing over the years, and in 2014, she counted eight white shark releases.

There is still much to learn about the white shark nursery and the journey of the white sharks, but Michaelson works hard with her own documentation in an effort to provide that much needed information.

Each shark species has its own purpose and role in the environment and are vital to the survival of all marine life. Michaelson said, "Sharks keep the oceans clean of the sick, diseased, and dying. They help ensure that fish stocks and reefs are healthy.

Researching shark biology, population studies, migratory paths, and areas used for aggregating, mating, foraging, and pupping is important not only to their future but the future of the ocean as well."

Because of New Jersey's dynamic history with sharks, Michaelson believes it is very important that the Jersey Shore community accepts the fact that sharks are present, learns to cohabitate with the shark population, and does everything possible to ensure that they are around for years to come.

"It's my passion and job to engage and educate the public about common misconceptions about sharks, and issues that sharks face every day," she said. She urges everyone to replace their fear of sharks with education and knowledge. "Sometimes people are scared of an advocate like me. I am not anti-fishing; rather, I appreciate our local anglers, who are my eyes and ears on the sea. As sightings become more frequent, all I would like to do is share a realistic view for a healthy future with sharks. Sharks are not evolved to eat humans. I want to quell fears, not create them," she said. Michaelson looks forward to expanding her research, education, and network in hope that both the public and the sharks benefit from her dedication and commitment to shark awareness.

—Jill Ocone

For more information, visit Melissa Michaelson's Facebook pages:  
[www.facebook.com/melissa.michaelson.90?fref=ts](https://www.facebook.com/melissa.michaelson.90?fref=ts)  
[www.sharks.org/leadership/sri-staff/melissa-michaelson-facebook](http://www.sharks.org/leadership/sri-staff/melissa-michaelson-facebook)

continued on page 12



Fred Lavitman and Damien Romeo

**A white shark pup caught four miles off Barnegat Inlet by anglers aboard the Angelina Marie on June 17, 2014. It was released and is one of the eight pups that she documented in 2014.**