

From attacks to risk management: How does Reunion Island deal with sharks?

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Shark attacks always happened in Reunion Island but became more frequent since 2011, leading to security problems with socio-economic consequences. The French government with local authorities and European funding implemented a global shark risk management plan to reducing the shark risk encounter while conserving the biodiversity, economical and recreational activities. The Reunion Island shark risk strategy is composed of several tasks, including bull and tiger shark fishing programme, beach netting with eco-barrier or exclusion nets to protect bathers and surfers, education and public awareness, science and innovation, and communication. Since 2016, actions are coordinated by a local agency named CRA. While virtually nothing was known about sharks and shark risk management in Reunion Island, in 5 years, an innovative fishing technic called smart drumline was developed, two popular beaches were protected with exclusion nets adapted to local rough sea conditions, surf training of the Reunion Island team are secured by a squad of skilled snorkelers supported by a technological boat, and scientific studies improved the knowledge on the biology and ecology of sharks. Debates on the causes of this recent increase in shark attacks and solutions to stop them remain however, and behind the shark crisis, are expressed both ecological and socio-economic problems that the island is facing. One of the most emblematic expressions of this crisis is the bashing of the marine protected area, which would be responsible to increase the risk of attacks. More generally, defiance toward scientists and politics exist. In these conditions challenges to support a sustainable development of the island and the conservation of the environment are numerous and solutions non-trivial. Discussions between groups of actors on the solutions to reduce the shark risk and public education seem the most efficient way to solve the human-shark conflict.