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From the **EDITOR**

Shark Week comes around this summer July 21-28.

This semi-serious annual event that started 36 years ago by the Discovery Channel has since been adopted by bars, aquariums and other venues looking to tap into the public's insatiable fascination with this ancient species.

But, as Michaela Thompson told an audience at Avery Point in April, there is more to Shark Week than clever marketing. Looking at it through her anthropologist's lens, she sees it as a manifestation of the shifting relationship between people and sharks, and perhaps the rest of nature.

Thompson, environmental historian and sustainability scientist at the Harvard Extension School, previewed her forthcoming book in a talk titled "Shadows in the Water: What Sharks Tell Us About Ourselves," that was part of the annual Coastal Perspectives Lectures on campus. By happy coincidence, Thompson came to share her insights on the dynamics of human-shark interactions just as this issue of *Wrack Lines*, framed around a more universal version of the same theme, was going into production. She handed me a perfect nugget to represent the whole mountain, the metaphoric story of one creature that illustrates the broader concept of the ever-changing nature of nature and the human role in it.

Widespread interest in sharks, she noted, is an artifact of 20th Century technological advances and trends in human society. New equipment for exploring the sea has made scientific study of sharks possible for the first time, and the rise of beachgoing as a popular pastime put millions within proximity of the sharks' domain for the first time on a large scale. Before then, only sailors and fishermen encountered sharks, and often they described them as "cowards" because of their opportunistic eating habits.

"The rise of beach culture and marine recreation thrust sharks and humans into unprecedented contact," Thompson said.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the number of shark attacks on humans rose sharply, mainly because of the "numbers game" of more people swimming, surfing and sailing at the shore. Peter Benchley, author of the book that became the infamous 1975 movie *Jaws*, used the real-life shark attacks as the basis for his thriller.

"*Jaws* doesn't occur in a vacuum," Thompson said.

But a sea change has happened since the anti-shark frenzy whipped up by *Jaws*. Attention to sharks turned into curiosity, and more scientific study. Awareness grew about the important role sharks play in the ecosystem. In recent decades, as their survival in the marine habitat they depend on became more precarious, "the narrative shifted from saving people from sharks to saving sharks from people.

"There has been an evolving perception of sharks," Thompson said. "They've gone from being considered cowards to killers to charismatic megafauna to conservation objects."

But the core tension of our relationship with sharks remains. Sharks are predators that sometimes prey on humans.

"We are resistant to the notion that we could be prey for other animals," she said, out of a belief in "human exceptionalism."

Sharks present just one example of the dynamic environment we humans are part of and must continually adapt to. This issue looks at marsh scientists, an artist, a shoreline community, aquaculture researchers and marine biologists observing the changes in the environment and doing what they can to help all of us both adapt and build healthier relationships with nature in the process. That may require putting the notion "human exceptionalism" aside.



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Above: A diver photographs an oceanic whitetip shark as part of a research project. Photo: Peter Auster. To see more shark photos, visit: <https://seagrant.uconn.edu/?p=11758>

Cover: Marsh grass advancing into a coastal forest at Barn Island Wildlife Management Area in Stonington is marked with a transect of orange flags as part of a research project. Photo: Shimon Anisfeld.

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About OUR CONTRIBUTORS

GRACE CAJSKI

Grace Cajski is studying marine conservation and English at Yale University. As a 2022-2024 NOAA Hollings Scholar, she worked with the Milford lab GoPro team to analyze scup behavior around oyster aquaculture cages. Cajski is interested in sustainable aquatic food systems and how coastal communities are feeding themselves in a changing world. She supports bottom-up, community-based conservation efforts rooted in sustainability and longevity. Her articles have been published in *ECO* and *Oceanographic* magazines, and her work has been recognized by the Udall Foundation and the Association of the U.S. Navy.



PAUL CHOINIÈRE

Paul Choiniere is a lifelong journalist who spent much of his career writing about all things Connecticut for *The Day* of New London. His reporting included health, science, and the environment. He received numerous awards for investigative reporting on safety violations at the Millstone Nuclear Power Station in Waterford in the 1990s. Lessons learned from the problems at Millstone led to major reforms in nuclear power regulation. From 2007 until his retirement in 2021, he served as *The Day's* opinion editor. He now does freelance reporting, editing and opinion writing.



MAGGIE COZENS

Maggie Cozens is the Long Island Sound Study outreach coordinator with Connecticut Sea Grant and UConn Extension. She works to increase appreciation, stewardship, awareness and understanding of Long Island Sound through the development of engaging and inclusive outreach and educational programming. She holds a Master of Science in Environmental Science from the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, with a special focus on salt marsh and wetlands conservation.



OWEN PLACIDO

Owen Placido is an assistant extension educator focused on nature-based approaches to climate adaptation. He works to connect individuals and communities to resources that can help them adapt to climate impacts, implement nature-based solutions and restore critical habitats in the Long Island Sound watershed. He is interested in how science, art and the environment intersect to create a sense of place. Owen joined Connecticut Sea Grant in 2023 after earning his Master of Science in environmental science from the University of Rhode Island.



JUDY BENSON

Judy Benson has been communications coordinator at Connecticut Sea Grant and editor of *Wrack Lines* since 2017. Before that, she was a newspaper reporter and editor, concluding her journalism career at *The Day* of New London covering health and the environment. She is the author of a book created in collaboration with artist Roxanne Steed: *Earth and Sky: Nature Meditations in Word and Watercolor*, published in 2021 by New London Librarium (nllibrarium.com). She earned both a bachelor's degree in journalism and a Master of Science in natural resources from UConn.

