



Date:

Increased knowledge about sharks increases public concern about their conservation

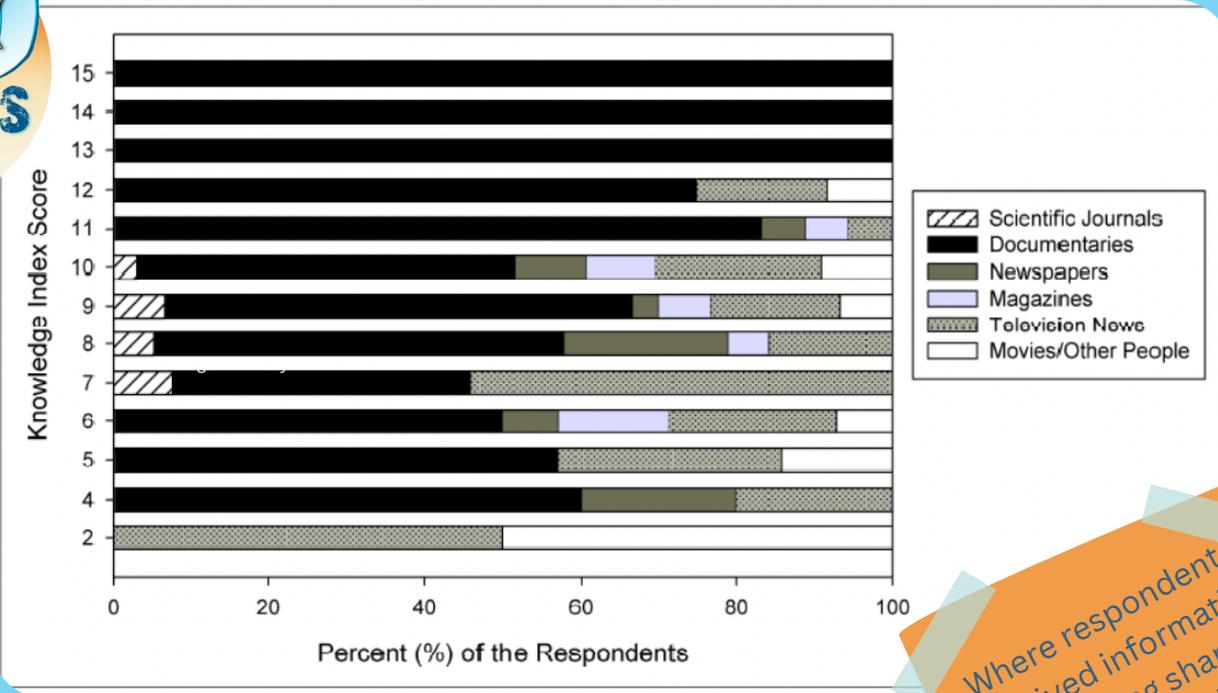
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Abstract

Gaining support for shark conservation has been extremely difficult due to the negative preconceived notions the general public holds toward sharks. In order to achieve public support for conservation initiatives the factors that will change an individual's attitude and behavior toward sharks must first be determined. Using structured questionnaire interviews (n = 186), indices were created that rated an individual's knowledge, attitude, and potential behavior toward sharks and shark conservation. Generally public knowledge levels about sharks were low. However, people with more knowledge pertaining specifically about sharks had potential behaviors more supportive of their conservation. Therefore, it would seem that increases in public knowledge on sharks would help gain support for shark conservation. Males, members of environmental groups, and viewers of shark documentaries and "Shark Week" all showed significantly higher levels of knowledge about sharks. The media (such as "Shark Week") can play a significant role in promoting conservation, but unfortunately media coverage of sharks has been controversial recently with the airing of several non-factual, fake documentaries. To promote shark conservation the media's message has to be unbiased, non-sensationalized, and accurate to ensure people are receiving the information necessary to build strong pro-shark conservation behaviors.

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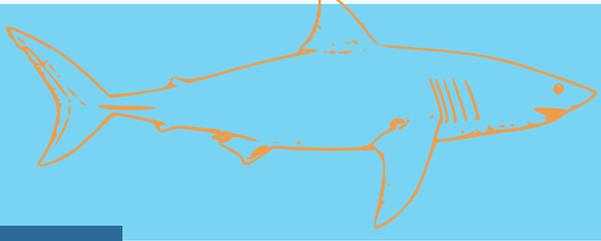


Where respondents received information regarding sharks significantly impacted their levels of knowledge about sharks.

Summary

Sharks are facing vast population declines and their survival depends on establishing new science-based legislation to protect species of concern. The media (news, movies, tv shows) has played a big role in creating the perception that sharks are “mindless eating machines” which has established a negative perception in the public eye and hinders conservation efforts. It has previously been found that increased knowledge on a subject can lead to a more positive attitude about that subject and therefore can lead to major shifts in policy change. Due to the combination of negative attitudes toward sharks and the critical need for improved shark conservation efforts, it is imperative to change the public perception of sharks.

The scientists who conducted this study wanted to know what variables (like ages and gender) shaped an individual's attitude and behavior towards sharks and their conservation. Through a social survey, they were able to gauge the respondent's knowledge specifically about sharks, attitudes toward sharks, and potential behaviors toward sharks and their conservation. They found that a person's knowledge about sharks, regardless of their age and education level, significantly impacts their potential behavior toward shark conservation. Since most individuals must actively choose to obtain information about sharks on their own, ensuring that there are different forms of media with factual and non-sensationalized information is imperative to promote pro-shark conservation behaviors.



Check Your Understanding

Why is education about sharks important?

What is the primary finding of this study? Summarize in 2-3 sentences.

What is one method that can be used to create positive attitudes about sharks?

How might geographic location affect the results from this study? Think both on a national and international scale.

Fun Fact: Surveys were distributed at automotive dealerships waiting rooms in the Northern VA/ DC area.

Glossary of Key Terms

Behavior- the way in which one acts or conducts oneself, especially towards others.

Shark Week- an annual, week long TV programming block at the Discovery Channel, which features shark-based programming.

Conservation- prevention of wasteful use of a resource.

Attitudes-

naturalistic- interest in direct experience with animals and the exploration of nature

ecologicistic- concern for the environment as a system; for inter-relationships between wildlife species and natural habitats

humanistic- interest and strong affection for animals, with strong emotional attachment and “love” for them.

moralistic- concern for the right and wrong treatment of animals, with strong opposition to exploitation or cruelty toward animals