Regulations and a Permit Process for White Shark Adventure Tourism and Research Activity at the Farallon Islands, California

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White shark adventure tourism has increased dramatically in recent years at Southeast Farallon Island in the Gulf of the Farallones National Marine Sanctuary (GFNMS), California. Currently there are no regulations in place regarding the behavior of tourism companies or the number of companies that can operate at the Farallones, in attempts to show white sharks to their clientele. We are especially concerned about the dumping of chum and other chemicals to attract sharks, the deployment of surfboards and other decoys to elicit attack responses from sharks, and the close approach of large tourist boats to feeding sharks, resulting in the permanent displacement of the sharks from their prey. We believe that these behaviors have negative impacts on the ability of the sharks to feed and thus are disrupting an important component to the marine ecology of the area.

For the April 29, 2003 Wildlife Disturbance Working Group Meeting hosted by the Gulf of the Farallones National Marine Sanctuary, we submitted a detailed report calling for regulations affecting both the adventure tourism industry and research at the Farallones to limit the potential impacts of these activities to white sharks at the Farallones. Lawrence Groth also submitted proposed guidelines for shark observation activity at the Farallones form the cage-dive industry’s perspective.

Both of these parties stressed that the use of decoys to attract sharks could be categorized into two types, active trolling and stationary deployment. Active trolling elicits an “attack response” from white sharks, during which the sharks hit the board with force, often propelling themselves and the decoy clear out of the water. It was agreed by both parties that this activity has little scientific or educational value, has the potential to harm the sharks and confuse their hunting strategies, and should be banned. Stationary deployment more often elicits an investigative response that is not as harmful or disruptive to sharks and their hunting strategies. Both parties agreed that this could be permitted in a restricted geographical area for the purposes of research and education, without imposing undue disturbance to the sharks.

It was agreed at the meeting that the most effective way to move forward would be to implement both regulations and a permit process for both research and adventure-tourism activity at the island. To facilitate the process we are here providing recommendations that we hope can be supported by both researchers and adventure-tourism operators.
Recommendations Regarding White Shark Viewing and Research in the Gulf of the Farallones National Marine Sanctuary (GFNMS):

We recommend the following:

1) No vessels can approach feeding white sharks in the GFNMS within 50 m.

2) No decoys shall be actively trolled behind boats within the GFNMS. Decoys are defined as any floating object larger than 50 cm and smaller than 4 m in length.

3) The stationary deployment of decoys shall be allowed only in a restricted area (within the GFNMS) to the south and east of Southeast Farallon Island, as shown on the enclosed maps.

4) No chumming of any type of material shall be allowed for shark-viewing or research purposes.

5) The deployment of cages shall be allowed only in a restricted area to the south and east of Southeast Farallon Island, as shown on the enclosed maps.

6) No intentional "take" (defined as the actual or attempted harassment, hunt, capture, or kill) of white sharks by any means may occur.

We propose two strategies for defining the restricted area(s) from which operators can deploy decoys and cages. Our recommended strategy is to define two stations, one off East Landing (at the buoy) and the other in Mirounga Bay, as shown on Map A. If more than one operator is present then use of each station would be on a first-come-first-serve basis. Our second recommendation would be to limit these activities to a larger area defined by Shubrick Point to the east and the west end of Saddle Rock to the south, as shown on Map B. In either case, we would like to see these areas restricted as much as possible to ensure the least amount of disturbance to the least number of sharks.
Proposed Shark Restriction Zone Map A
Proposed Shark Restriction Zone Map B