



## **Shark Attacked, Media Bites Rosie O'Donnell**

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A bit of a splash erupted on the Web yesterday in the form of photos showing a boat displaying two hammerheads. One was a shark. The other was the celebrity, Rosie O'Donnell. The web quickly lit up with attacks on Rosie, saying among other things that because she brought her kids fishing for sharks, she was "a bad mom."

Well, maybe. But let's dissect just a little. I'm willing to cut her some slack.

First, although I'm a lifelong ocean conservationist, I am going to resist quite piling onto the attack. And I'll tell you why; I've done something rather similar, as I'll explain. Then, for what it's worth, I'll tell you the two things I found distasteful. But before we get to that, I'll tell you what I thought was positive about the story and what it says about us all—in a good way.

It was good that people attacked Rosie for killing a shark. They didn't attack her for being liberal, an adoptive gay parent, or a lady fisherman. I'm just a few years older than Rosie, and I can remember when a woman on a boat was a rarity. Any woman on a boat unaccompanied by a man was so unheard of that I rather vividly remember the first time I saw such a thing (I was 18, and she, early 20s, was wearing a rather nice halter top). Further, Rosie let her daughter fight the shark—a near-unthinkable incursion into what only a few years ago was a nearly unbreachable boys' bastion of angling. So good for us—we focused on the part of the person and the story that mattered: her and the shark.

Now, about that, I'll cut her just a little slack. For about 20 years, I did a lot of shark fishing. And on more occasions than I can recall, I took kids with me. There are few things as exciting for a kid as throwing chunks of fish to a large shark swimming around a boat, or feeling its incredible power on the end of a line. I still get a kick out of it. One major difference is that we released almost all the sharks we ever caught. (And we didn't just cut the wire leader; I had a hook remover.) And the several sharks we killed, we ate (I understood less about mercury then; sharks have a lot of it). I killed my last shark, a mako, in 1997, and no sooner had I tied it to the boat's cleat than I knew it would be my last. (In my book, *The View From Lazy Point*, that capture and my change of heart is chronicled.) I am not ashamed of what I did then, but I wouldn't do it now. The sharks, and the world, have changed.

Ms. O'Donnell, by contrast, was unrepentant, defiant, and profane in response to her shark-hugging critics. I would have preferred her to seem a little more evolved on things ocean, explaining that it was years ago and she now understands things differently. Instead, in her Twitter tweets she defended the killing by saying that hammerhead shark meat can be used to bait crab traps. Well, so can human corpses. And that reminds me of a good joke from Maine, but that's for another time.\*

Probably most distasteful about the incident is that the boat captain put these photos on his Website after the state banned killing of all three species of hammerheads. That ban just went into effect, January 1. It's probably no coincidence that he posted years-old photos right after a ban for the species. It shows: disdain for the sharks he's made a living from (where I live, a lot of boats carry paying customers for catch-and-release shark fishing), disrespect for the new law, and a certain macho desperation in trying to defy changing public attitudes towards ocean wildlife. His website also displays a rather remarkable congenital boastfulness and a penchant for unusual capitalization ("We are a better Charter Fishing Boat than the Saltwater Sport Fishing Charter Boats on the East Coast and in the Florida Keys, including the fleet of Deep Sea Fishing Boats in Key West"). All of which add up to making him yet another hammerhead in his own story.

Though killing the shark a few years ago is different than catching a protected species just after a fishing ban has been instated, it's not really a ton better. It's been obvious for 20 years that hammerhead sharks were among the first to get scarce after the global shark fin trade got out of control in the 1980s. (Shark fin is used as a thickener in Chinese shark fin soup, where part of the appeal is the idea of imbibing the strength and ferocity of the shark through its pulverized fins, an idea on par with thinking you'd stay warm if you ate polar bear fur.) Since I started shark fishing, I never would have considered killing a hammerhead.

I did, however, see hammerheads—and various other large sharks—virtually disappear before my eyes. When I first started fishing for sharks off Long Island, NY, in the 1980s, hammerheads were common. One day I hailed a distant boat over the radio to ask how he was doing, and he replied, "Plenty of hammerheads." Those days, long gone.

One boat, and one celebrity are nothing compared to the millions of sharks killed worldwide annually in commercial fisheries. But let's face it; it looks bad. Ms. O'Donnell might want to consider: 1) Not killing more sharks, 2) taking her kids scuba diving, 3) fishing for dinner and going home when they've caught enough, 4) getting a nice camera and good binoculars and, when the urge to go shark fishing strikes, going birding instead. It would all seem well suited to her otherwise caring and compassionate public persona.

\*Oh, yes, now about that joke—. Two lobstermen are hauling a line of traps when, strangely, up comes a big mass of lobsters that simply falls onto the deck; the mate suddenly realizes in horror that the lobsters were clinging to a human corpse that has somehow become tangled on their line. In panic he yells to the captain, "What should I do?" Surprised at the question, the captain replies, "Hell, set 'im again."