

15 February 2017

Christine McDonald
Senate Environment & Communications References Committee
Department of the Senate

Dear Committee,

Inquiry into the efficacy and regulation of shark mitigation and deterrent measures

For more than a century the surf lifesaving movement in Queensland has been built on a simple overarching premise – safeguarding beachgoers and eliminating drownings along the state’s coastline. With that in mind, Surf Life Saving Queensland’s (SLSQ) overarching vision of ‘Zero preventable deaths in Queensland public waters’ continues to resonate strongly across all levels of the organisation and is the cornerstone of every decision made, both on and off the beach.

As the state’s peak authority on coastal and aquatic safety, SLSQ continues to play a key role when it comes to shark management and prevention, working closely with key stakeholders at all levels to deliver safer beaches and educate swimmers about how to protect themselves in the water.

At a Government level, SLSQ works in cooperation and consultation with the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries, and is an active member on the Shark Marine Advisory Group on the Gold Coast. This sees key organisational representatives have direct input into the long-term strategy and day-to-day operations of the Shark Control Program (SCP) in Queensland.

On the ground, SLSQ’s lifeguards and lifesavers play an active role in shark prevention and management, particularly as a front-line defence when it comes to monitoring beaches and responding accordingly in the event of a sighting or attack.

Prior to 1962, regular shark attacks occurred on popular Queensland beaches and made them unsafe for recreation. Since the Government implemented the SCP, the number of shark attacks occurring on our beaches has decreased dramatically, with only 29.3 per cent of unprovoked and fatal attacks nation-wide occurring in Queensland.

By way of background, SLSQ has statewide standard operating procedures in place for shark sightings, including guidelines that cover when surf lifesavers will act to clear the water and close a beach. Amongst other things, these state that surf lifesavers will close a beach for at least 60 minutes after a confirmed shark sighting, or until the threat has otherwise subsided. If and when this occurs, lifesavers on duty liaise closely with beachgoers to communicate these processes and ensure that swimmers are kept out of harm’s way.

Lifesavers also work proactively with key stakeholders to help remove shark nets and buoys when particularly large or dangerous swells are forecast, and will immediately alert the shark hotline if a creature is spotted within the nets and/or buoys.

SLSQ also regularly makes use of its Westpac Lifesaver Rescue Helicopter Service to monitor shark movement and assist with shark sightings from the air.

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While rare, shark attacks in Queensland waters are a legitimate concern, and one which SLSQ remains committed to addressing in order to help deliver safer beaches to all Queenslanders.

With that in mind, SLSQ recognises the value and importance of the SCP when it comes to protecting both the bathing public and our patrolling members in and around the water. However, SLSQ also recognises that other marine creatures are unfortunately caught in the nets from time to time, while continued public debate and general misconceptions surrounding the program remain key issues.

Having said that, SLSQ would have significant concerns over the safety of public beachgoers if the shark nets and/or buoys were to ever be removed or reduced. The last fatal shark attack on a popular Queensland beach was more than ten years ago, in January 2006 at Amity Point on North Stradbroke Island, and it is clear the SCP has been effective in preventing similar tragedies in the years since. Should the current preventative measures be reduced, it is our fear that additional attacks and fatalities could and would occur in Queensland waters.

Moving forward, SLSQ would like to see additional buoys in place at other popular high-risk locations, and particularly around run-off river mouths such as Tallebudgera Creek, Paynter River and Mooloolah River where sharks are known to frequent these locations.

As an organisation, SLSQ commends the Government program and will continue to work closely with all key stakeholder groups on this issue to increase public safety and, ultimately, deliver on our vision of 'Zero preventable deaths in Queensland public waters'.

Sincerely,

George Hill ESM
Chief Operating Officer

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