

Shark kills 2 other sharks in California aquarium

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The great white shark that has enthralled throngs of curious spectators at the Monterey Bay Aquarium since its arrival six months ago.

By

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MONTEREY, Calif. — The great white shark that has enthralled throngs of curious spectators at the Monterey Bay Aquarium since its arrival six months ago has proved lethal for some of its tank mates. Over 13 days, the young great white sank its razor-sharp teeth into two soupfin sharks, killing both.

The recent incidents have prompted calls and letters questioning whether a predator such as a great white is suitable for an aquarium.

The great white, the only one on exhibit in the world, is the first to survive in captivity for more than a few days, and the aquarium is determined to try to keep it for a while longer, possibly into the busy summer tourist season.

Thanks to the shark's residency, aquarium attendance is up 30 percent. Aquarium officials say the high attendance validates the decision to display the shark: Part of the aquarium's mission is to educate the public about fragile ocean species such as the great white shark.

“Are we keeping it here to generate more visitation? Absolutely,” said Randy Kochevar, a staff marine biologist who serves as science spokesman for the aquarium. “The more visitors, the more we get the word out. Bringing people face-to-face with real animals is the best way to inspire people in conservation.”

But Sean Van Sommerman, executive director of the Pelagic Shark Research Foundation in Santa Cruz, said displaying the shark simply promotes awareness of the aquarium and helps fill its coffers.

Visitors did not see either shark attack, which occurred when the aquarium was closed. The first happened overnight Feb. 23. The second took place around 7:30 a.m. March 7. By the time aquarium officials noticed the second injured soupfin shark, visitors had arrived and saw it as well. Aquarium officials sutured the injured shark’s wound, but it did not survive.

One soupfin was 4 feet long and weighed 85 pounds; the other was 5 feet, 6 inches long and 125 pounds.

Both incidents were captured on cameras that monitor the million-gallon Outer Bay tank, which the great white shares with other sea life, including tuna, barracuda and sea turtles.

Aquarium officials say that in both cases, the great white appeared to have been spooked by soupfin sharks that swam too close.

The great white is known to feed on other sharks but was not apparently trying to eat the soupfins, Kochevar said. The aquarium has tried to prevent the shark from noshing on its neighbors by feeding it several times a day.

The female great white was about 4 to 6 months old when it was trapped in a commercial fisherman's net off Huntington Beach in August and taken to the aquarium. It arrived at 4 feet, 6 inches long and weighing 62 pounds.

Over the past six months it has grown about a foot and gained about 40 pounds, but it is still not the largest fish in the tank. Some tuna in the tank weigh more than 300 pounds. Full-grown great whites run 12 to 15 feet long, with some known to exceed 20 feet.