

J-Bay Open Surf in South Africa: Shark “Attack”, Mick Fanning and Surfing with the Animals

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It happened at the J-Bay Open surf event in Jeffreys Bay, South Africa, featuring Australian surfer Mick Fanning and a shark that found itself grabbing the champion surfer's leg rope. "It just kept coming at my board and I was kicking and screaming." Then came the inevitable sop story, embroidered with the necessary trauma, specifically of the human variety. There was the interviewed mother, Elizabeth Osborne. There were the rounds about the hero in the water fighting off the shark.

One fact stood out: The shark, in such cases, can't win. When a foolish human is found on the menu, the fictional social contract between *Homo sapiens* and other creatures – a unilateral understanding about how humans coexist with such putatively “savage” animals – is broken.

Not that the animals in question have been asked about this peculiar, demeaning arrangement of anthropomorphic convenience. The tribe gets irritable at the loss or injury of one of their own; a mobilisation effort to hunt the animal tends to follow.

Culls are advocated, as they were by the eccentrically unhinged Reclaim Australia spokesman, Councillor Keith Carton. Rather inventively, Carton managed to identify the complacency towards shark attacks as similar to that towards “domestic terrorism”. He saw omens in the shark encounter with Manning: “Australia's attempts at integration have failed and in turn we are sitting ducks for terrorists and sharks.”^[1] Beware, he warned, of the next “Sydney siege” in the form of killer sharks.

Other measures of protection – for humans – are also introduced in the wake of dramatised shark encounters, including, as what happened in Western Australia, murderous baited drumlines. All this, despite studies showing that humans and sharks, in the words of Leah Gibbs, “generally co-exist without ill effect.”^[2]

The show, as ever, remained on the three-time world champion. The tribe still had their surfer to venerate. There was no martyr in the equation. Would he surf again, asked the surfing punditry and groupies? Well, probably. Was his mental state up to scratch? Possibly, though according to sports psychologist Paul Penna, it would affect the “motivation” of other surfers (*Sydney Morning Herald*, Jul 20).

American sports sites were particularly keen to note the transformation of Fanning from surfing champion to shark gladiator of the hostile surf.^[3] A contributor to Fansided was clear. “One thing is certain from this whole attack – Mick Fanning just became the world's biggest badass for fighting a shark live on television and winning without suffering an injury.”^[4]

The warrior theme sizzled through the social media scape. “While you were asleep,” extolled sports pundit Titus O’Reilly, “Australia defeated England at Lord’s and Mick Fanning defeated a shark.” The energy drinks label Red Bull decided to go for some cheap marketing, observing that Fanning, the touted “Shark Fighter” had gotten a point against “Jaws”: “If you attack Mick, remember it’s a fight to the fin-ish.”

To add to this was the interplay between Fanning and his fellow surfer, Julian Wilson. There were shades of mighty Achilles and his male companion Patroclus. As the video coverage showed, Wilson paddled in desperation towards Fanning, a somewhat futile act that did, nonetheless, make Fanning describe him as a person who “came to my aid as a warrior”. “Mick yells as Jules to get away while Jules frantically tries to save his friend,” tweeted surfer Clifton James Hobgood.

There was, however, one grand absentee in these sugar-coated reflections. To add some dubious balance, Samuel Gruber of the Bimini Biological Field Station Foundation in the Bahamas decided to get into the mind of the shark. The animal, he posited with psychological curiosity, probably thought Fanning a seal. Struggling metaphors were offered. “Kind of like a lion jumping on you and missing the leap going over the cliff.”

But the nature of social media got others interested from another perspective. The shark with no name, merely an object used to direct veneration at a surfer, suddenly found itself with a Twitter account. One suitably doctored image sported a shark facing a row of press microphones: “I was just swimming along, bit into some tasty leg rope, and some dude hits me in the back... Madness!”

The spoof website News Thump also came up with a different approach, reversing the agency between man and fish with the title, “Shark survives attack by Australian surfer.” Here, the shark had a name – Simon Williams – and a grievance to parade. The purported shark Williams had told the news site that he was “just swimming along thinking about stopping for something to eat when the next thing I know I’m being sucker-punched by this Aussie – right in the small of the back.”^[5] It was pain he had to endure as a minor celebrity in “shark circles”.

Others reminded Fanning and company that humans had overstepped their supreme entitlements to natural real estate. To Fanning’s credit, he admitted having been “in their domain” though the sentiment was dismissed as a silly remark by Brisbane’s *The Courier Mail*.^[6] Greater numbers of swimmers were making their ways into the world’s waters, increasing the number of culinary opportunities.

The entire episode did start to resemble an idiosyncratic confection, an emoting narrative in search of heroic Toreadors and challenging bulls. It was no such thing. To subsequently convey the impression that this was a battle between man and beast involves a good deal of mythmaking. Humans have an agency, cognitive and physical, their sea sharers do not. Fanning, and his fellow surfers, had appropriated a space of sporting engagement contested by shark sovereignty. Swim and surf, by all means, but do so in such environments at your own peril. Simon Williams might be just behind you.

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