

Prof beats 'Jawsmania'

By Rex Seline

Before the so-called "Jawsmania" shark terror swallowed the interest of the country, UNL Zoology Professor Thomas Thorson was studying the finned throwback to ancient times.

No, Thorson has yet to discover any 25-foot Great White Sharks. Nor does he harbor any secret desire to end up as shark food.

"If you handle a shark right, they're no big problem," Thorson said. "Just don't go into the water where they're at home. Stay on the land where you're at home."

Thorson has been studying the habits and movements of the Bull Shark in and around South America's Lake Nicaragua.

"We've been studying the biology, movements and physiology of the freshwater sharks and their relatives, like the sawfish and the stingrays," Thorson said. "We're trying to determine how the Bull Sharks are able to live both in the fresh water of Lake Nicaragua and the sea."

He said a tagging program he established when he first began his studies nearly 15 years ago has proved that the shark and some of his relatives travel between the sea and the lake.

He said this was the first proof of the shark's capability to change from a freshwater to salt water environment, as the better-known salmon and eel do.

But Thorson said he has yet to pinpoint a reason for the shark's movement between environments beyond a search for food.

"Apparently it's not a requirement of its life history or a requirement for reproduction," unlike the salmon and the eel, according to Thorson.

Nicaraguan grant

In February, he will begin a new round of research with a grant from the Central Bank of Nicaragua, which will examine year-long habits of the sharks. He said he will visit Nicaragua in October to set up the research and return in February to initiate it, but otherwise will not be on location for the research.

A former American Peace Corps volunteer who remained in South America will direct the operations of local fishermen in catching and tagging the sharks, Thorson said. In past studies he has used students and graduates as assistants.

Thorson said that while he has been doing research in South America there have been no shark-related accidents.

"I suppose if you were studying sharks in the ocean, you might go into the water to study them in their habitat," Thorson said. "But the water is so murky down there we couldn't see anything anyway, so we don't go into the water and don't have many problems."

He said the only problem he's faced is the slashing movements of the shark's head and tail when they are brought to the beach for tagging and then quickly released.

"But their middle stays still while they're slashing, so we straddle them to tag them," he said.

Eight-footer

The largest shark Thorson has seen was a female Bull Shark "a little" over eight-foot long, although he said he has seen larger ones in photographs.

And then there's the 25-foot monster from "Jaws"...

"As entertainment, it was probably a pretty good picture," Thorson admitted. "But from the standpoint of science, it wasn't accurate."

He said that although a shark's mind is not completely understood, he believed the movie was a bit overdrawn.

"I don't believe any shark has the type of mind to pursue a boat," Thorson said. "And once he catches it, I don't think he'd go up the deck to get the captain."

Thorson said he finally saw the movie after many people questioned him about it.

"It strains my credulity, but I suppose it's good entertainment for laymen," he said.

Some of the facts in the movie are accurate, though, according to Thorson. "Sharks will eat practically anything,



Photo courtesy of Thomas Thorson

Tagging sharks in Nicaragua. Insert: UNL Zoology Professor Thomas Thorson.

although they don't generally take the unusual things like license plates and cans," he said.

"It's also true that they are attracted by unusual, irregular vibrations in the water like those caused by swimming," he added.

If a person should get caught in the water with a shark interested in attacking, Thorson recommended swimming as steadily as possible to the nearest shore or boat, "although the chances aren't very great that a shark would attack."

He said the last confirmed death by shark in the Lake Nicaragua area occurred in the late 1950s.

He also said that past shark repellents were ineffective.

"The 'Shark Chaser' repellent used by

the Navy for years may have provided a tremendous psychological feeling for downed airplane fliers, but tests have proved that it wasn't very effective," Thorson said.

Effective deterrent

Thorson did say that a University of Maryland researcher has discovered that secretions from a Red Sea fish effectively deter sharks.

"In tests, the fish, tied to a line or something, has been left in a shark infested area and has consistently discouraged and driven off sharks," Thorson said.

He added that the researchers should be close to being able to produce enough proper synthetic substitute to make the repellent feasible for distribution.



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