

JAWS (1975)

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Jaws(1975) is an American thriller film directed by Steven Spielberg, that contains many more inaccuracies--such as misinformed historical facts and incorrect information on great white sharks--than accuracies and correct information--like dates of historical events and migratory habits. While it is technically a thriller movie, it is still very important that it contains correct and realistic information. Unlike most movies of the genre, *Jaws* gets its "thrill"--or scare factor--from the realistic implications of the film. Without accurate information it would not be believable.

Even though there are very few accuracies in the film, it did its job. Before this time, fear of sharks, or any marine-life for that matter, was very rare. However, after its release in 1975, *Jaws* was instilling fear in people's imaginations across the country. This fear was very unnecessary as well as based on fictional information. For example, during one of the scenes, the sheriff and marine biologist are explaining the dangers of opening the beach to swimmers. They refer to a series of shark attacks in 1916 along the "Jersey Beach," leaving five people dead within a week. The "Rogue Shark attacks of 1916" is a real string of events that occurred in New Jersey waters. The reality of the events are far less exaggerated; the real attacks killed four people in a matter of twelve days (Rogue,2009). In addition to the four dead, two to seven serious injuries were reported as well--the exact number of accounts vary, depending on the source of information and different definitions of "serious injury."

The most significant of Peter Benchley's inspirations for writing the novel *Jaws* in 1974 was in fact the so called "Rogue Shark Attacks of 1916." Despite denying such claims in an article published in 2001 in *New York Times*, many experts believe the allusion made within the

story is a reference to the events that inspired the story (Gambino, 2012). Being based off of a series of events of historical significance, the story should be relatively realistic right?

Sadly, as the novel before it, the movie--like all movies directed by Steven Spielberg that are inspired by true stories--is far from realistic and far from believable. The movie only includes two instances of accurate content. The first being that white sharks are found around the coastline of Massachusetts in the summer--the same time in which the movie takes place--however, populations of white sharks visit the area to gorge on the seal population, not swimmers(What...,2013). The second bit of information is slightly more relevant than migratory habits.

The allusion referencing the attacks in New Jersey was partially correct: the attacks were in the year 1916.

In the movie, Hooper states the event to be one of numerous confirmed shark attacks along the North American Atlantic coastline. The truth surrounding the events is a somewhat different story. In the words of Lee Krystek (in regards to the reactions of the public after the news of the first victim's death)

“The next day the headline in the New York Times read, "Dies After Attack by Fish." Definitely Vansant was killed by a sea creature, but what kind? Today, most people's first reaction was that it must have been a shark. That wasn't a fact that was obvious to most people in 1916, including many prominent scientists. There had never been a documented case of a shark attack on American shores before. Shark attacks seemed the thing of old sea tales. Many people were just as willing to believe the attacker was a giant mackerel or a huge sea turtle rather than a shark”(2009).

The general public was aware of the predatory nature of sharks during the early 1900's but they did not consider them to be potential man eaters. After the 1916 incident there were a

considerable amount of attacks by marine animals on humans that were blamed on the newfound threat.

After such immense publicity the White Shark--more commonly known as the "Great" White Shark--became the most feared animal on earth. Such fear of the species as a whole was almost forgotten during the years of the first World War, The Great Depression, The Dust Bowl, World War 2, and The Korean War. This widespread fear was reincarnated after 1974 after the release of *Jaws* in novel form, and the film release a year later.

Was there really anything to be afraid about? A movie is released with no evidence supporting its fictional story and thousands of people interpret it as non-fiction. In today's society it seems absurd. What must be taken into consideration is that the media during the 1970's was very different than the view-hungry ruthless news stations that are all so popular today. There were no experts on marine biology brought to a national news station and consulted about such concerns. During that time the research on sharks was very limited (Keen, 2006). With major economic, military, and political issues the United States of America became flooded with multiple duties that took priority over research into a fish that scared people because of a few freak accidents and a movie.

While most people were fearful of the newfound horrors that were found in the deep and practically took the movie's word as gospel, people who had experience with marine life scoffed at the film. Shark researcher George Burgess comments: "Back in 1975 when the movie came out, many of us who studied sharks sort of gasped at some of the inaccuracies and pooh-poohed it, but as the years have gone by, my perception has softened, partly out of a realization that it

was a victim of its time”(Keen,2006). This movie twisted historical events and figuratively struck the fear of god into most of the nation.

The inaccuracies in the movie had enough force to cause a panic among the nation. The only way people could think of to rid the coasts of these monsters was to hunt and kill them. The release of the film is not the only reason that white sharks were targeted for trophies.

Frank Mundus,during his life was and still is considered the greatest shark fisherman of all time. Publishing three books and even a short children's book, Mundus claims to be the inspiration for the character Quint in the movie. His website is still kept running by his wife, who conducted interviews with him prior to his death. Starting his shark fishing career in 1951, he called his guide trips “monster fishing” to attract customers. When asked if the character Quint in the popular movie was modeled off of him, he responded: “Yes, he was. He knew how to handle the people the same way I did. He also used similar shark fishing techniques based on my methods. The only difference was that I used hand held harpoons after field-testing harpoon guns and discovering that they didn't work: the dart would pull out after hitting the fish”(Mundis,2000). His opinion of the movie was also interesting,

“It was the funniest and the stupidest movie I've ever seen because too many stupid things happened in it. For instance, no shark can pull a boat backwards at a fast speed with a light line and stern cleats that are only held in there by two bolts. And I've never boiled shark jaws. If you do, you'll only end up with a bunch of teeth at the bottom of your bucket because the jaw cartilage melts.”

His response leads us to another example of an inaccurate scene from the movie. As stated by a shark fishing expert, it is impossible for a shark to accomplish such deeds as pulling a boat as it did during the final few scenes.While very few people are aware that rope cleats are not welded to the frame of boats. Under no circumstances would a ship be pulled in a negative direction,

with the inboard motor running at full capacity, being held by nothing more than light line and four small screws.

A professional shark fishing guide, who spent his entire life fishing for either large game-fish or shark disliked the movie about sharks! He may have disapproved of the movie's reasoning and logic, but America's desire to hunt down sharks from Spielberg's blockbuster made business boom. The resulting waves of customers include a particular gentleman whom Mundus assisted in catching a world record 3,247pound white shark in 1986.

Why is this relevant? both the novel and the film version of Peter Benchley's *Jaws* misinformed the nation about the supposed "killers" and as a result sharks of all kinds were persecuted by both trophy hunters and shark finatics. Socially speaking, the nation is yet to recover from the impact of the movie. Barely mutter something about a shark in the water while you are at a beach and every person within fifty yards will rush out of the water as fast as they can. The franchise and movie series has left an impact that is far from dissipating. The sad truth being that a magnificent being such as the white shark can be called a man-killer, when according to a web-document from the Florida Museum of Natural History, only thirteen deaths have been a result of a white shark attack in the US in nearly a hundred years(FLMNH, 2012). Though the evidence against the white shark's reputation as a man-eater has slowly increased in strength over the years, the reputation it was given by the popular movie exceeds the logic of research.

The only benefit to the results of the movie is the amount of research, funded by the government because of the white shark's killer reputation, that is still beneficial to the current

knowledge of the species. Finally, the mass increase in shark fishing that resulted from the movie is still showing impacts on the populations of sharks in the North Atlantic Ocean, particularly on the white shark population: the species of bruce, the shark from *JAWS*.

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