

The truth about the 9 shark attacks known as 'Black December'

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December 18th 1957 to April 5th 1958 was a really bad time to go for a dip in the ocean if you lived in the Natal Province of South Africa.

During this short time there were at least nine shark attacks that left six people dead.

So how did this all come to pass? Mostly down to lots of blood in the water from whaling ships operating in the area, floods having washed livestock into the ocean, making the river deltas murky and to cap it all off, the tourist industry had significantly increased in the area - cue lots of excitable people splashing about in the sea.

It was like ringing the dinner bell, for Christ's sake!



And when we look at all different elements of this ‘perfect storm’, you can see how accurate some of JAWS was. Whilst Peter Benchley mostly claims the Jersey Shore attacks inspired his novel, the events in South Africa would probably have been known to the author.

When the flotilla of fishermen head out from Amity to try and kill the shark, they use explosives (more on this later) and there is a definite sense of anything goes in the pursuit of the monster. The guns came out, boat patrols and a real sense of desperation was in the air. There was not coordinated response, no action plan at all in fact. Brody wanted to close the beaches, the mayor said no. Economics won out over human safety and all in all, chaos ruled.

Much was the same in Durban...

There are differing dates recorded for the attacks across various sources but below are some details of what happened.

First to be attacked was 16 year old bodyboarder Robert Wherley on 18th December 1957. He lost his left leg from the knee down and part of the same thigh. Incredibly, this didn't raise many alarm bells because shark attacks had always been quite common in and around Durban.

Next, just two days later, was another teenager, 15 year old Allan Green. He'd barely waded into the water and got eaten for his trouble.

Three days later, on 23rd December, the sharks struck again. This time round it was a local man, Vernon James Berry, killed while floating off a different beach.

The beaches of Natal were given just three more days respite until Donald Webster was mauled savagely round the head and neck on 26th December. Incredibly, Donald survived his injuries.



Most of the shark species that carried out the attacks remain unknown but one is listed as being a Great White and this must've added to the panic felt in the Durban area. This

panic led to people leaving in the thousands. And as we know from other tourist resorts who experience a sudden uptick in marauding killer sharks, the effect on the local economy is devastating.

To protect ocean goers from the attacks, nets were put up, but the power of the surf soon ripped the nets to pieces. The next idea was to have the Navy drop depth charges. Unfortunately, this only attracted more sharks who'd turned up because of all the dead fish.

And that one fact alone really does make you think seriously about the plot of JAWS 2. Brody posits the idea that another shark might have come along after Bruce was killed to take his place. But when you see the facts about Black December, the idea of another shark being attracted to the very same spot thanks to the 3 tons of shark carcass floating around off Amity, it seems quite reasonable.

Meanwhile, back in South Africa, the attacks kept coming.

Julia Painting lost an arm while wading on 30th December and an unnamed man was killed while fishing - the date of his attack remains unclear. The next attack however, is dripping in irony.

Derrick Garth Prinsloo was fatally attacked when he decided to take just one last swim in the ocean before heading back to his totally landlocked farm on 4th January 1958.

Nicolas Badenhorst was next to be killed by an unknown species of shark on 4th March 1958. His arm was taken off above the elbow, he received bites to his abdomen and had his leg bitten while out swimming.

And finally Fay Jones Bester, a surfer, was attacked and killed two days later on 5th April 1958.



Because of Black December, from 1962, steel netting was erected to protect swimmers and surfers from future attacks, but the idea of netting has been controversial for years, causing a great deal of unnecessary harm and suffering to sea life.

As we look at these events through modern eyes we can see that this was a freak occurrence. It's never been repeated and hopefully never will be. It was commercial whaling that brought the sharks there in the first place and then the added ingredient of lots of people in the water.

The sharks were only doing what they've been programmed to do from millions of years of evolution.

To swim and eat and make little sharks.

Contrary to what Jaws: The Revenge would have you believe, it's nothing personal.

Words by [Tim Armitage](#)

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