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Reference: 019 – 23 SJ

Tuesday, 3 October 2023

The Hon. Tara Moriarty, MLC
Minister for Agriculture
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000
By Online form

The Hon. Penny Sharpe, MLC
Minister for Environment
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000
By Online form

Dear Ministers,

Re: Concerns about the DPI Shark Meshing (Bather Protection) Program

I write to you on behalf of the Sydney Coastal Councils Group (SCCG) to express concern about the significant number of non-target, threatened and protected species being killed by the NSW Government's Shark Meshing (Bather Protection) Program (SMP) as reported in the recently released [SMP 2022/23 Annual Performance Report](#).

We request greater consideration of non-invasive methods of shark mitigation and for the five-year review of the [Management Plan for the NSW Shark Meshing \(Bather Protection\) Program](#), also known as the Joint Management Agreement (JMA) to be done as this is overdue.

Who is the SCCG?

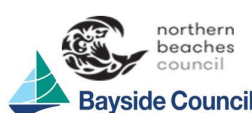
The SCCG is a regional organisation of councils established in 1989 to promote collaboration on issues relating to the sustainable management of Sydney's coastline and estuaries. The group comprises nine councils representing nearly 1.3 million Sydneysiders.

We are guided by the [SCCG's Strategic Plan 2019-2029](#) which includes Goal 4 - Marine biodiversity is protected in the bioregion.

Impact on non-target species continues to be alarming

The latest SMP 2022/23 Annual Performance Report identified concerning data for non-target species. Of the 228 marine animals caught:

- 89.5% were non-target species whilst only 10.5% were target species (18 White Sharks and 6 Tiger Sharks)



- 22% (65) were threatened species including White Sharks, Grey Nurse Sharks, Leatherback Turtles, Loggerhead Turtles, Green Turtles, Seals and the Great Hammerhead Shark. Of these, 54% were found dead (35)
- Only 37% were released alive; no data is provided around the post-release mortality rates. It should be noted that release data is not necessarily an indicator of their survival following release.
- 3.5% of interactions were with protected species (6 Indo-Pacific Bottlenose Dolphins and 2 Common Dolphins). All were found dead.

These figures are largely consistent with previous years but as raised by the [NSW Threatened Species Scientific Committee](#) (TSSC) regarding last year's Shark Management Program they are still alarming:

“The consistent annual record of non-target species being caught in nets is of significant concern to the NSW TSSC. ... A large non-target catch has continued for many years with little effective actions to reduce the quantities... We are concerned that the mortality cost is likely to be greater than recorded in the report, as there is no knowledge about the survival of the clearly stressed animals that were released, and we consider that survival is likely to be impacted.”

Effectiveness of shark meshing in protecting bathers questionable

Shark meshing was introduced in 1937 and is now considered outdated technology. A study conducted by the University of Wollongong on the NSW Shark Meshing Program identified that shark nets were not effective at keeping people safe and lead to significant impacts upon non-target species¹.

NSW is also lagging other jurisdictions by continuing to adopt shark meshing over alternative shark mitigation options. For example, in South Africa drumlines are being introduced to replace some nets.

The SCCG also believes there is a lack of community awareness about the effectiveness of shark meshing with many believing the nets extend along the whole beach and are there all year round. Shark nets in NSW do not extend the whole length of the beach and are only installed from 1 September to 30 April. It has been reported that many sharks are actually captured in nets after they swim past them a second time when returning back out to sea.

Currently, public safety in the other half of the year is provided by alternative non-invasive methods which were trialled in 2019 and shown to be successful. These include SMART drumlines, drones and tagged shark listening devices.

SMART Drumlines are an effective and non-invasive alternative to shark meshing

According to consultation information sent to SCCG member Councils in July 2023, the Department of Primary Industries (DPI) Shark Management Program involves the deployment of 305 SMART drumlines from Tweed to Eden (year-round weather permitting). The information also gave a comparison between shark meshing and SMART drumlines for each Council. For Waverley in the 2022-23 season (see extract in Attachment 1) it showed that 100% of animals were released alive when captured by SMART drumlines compared with 0% released alive by shark nets.

The NSW Government also relies on SMART drumlines for protecting bathers from 1 May to 30 August when shark nets are not installed. DPI's own web-site states that the data on SMART

¹ Gibbs et al (2019) *Effects and effectiveness of lethal shark hazard management: The Shark Meshing (Bather Protection) Program, NSW, Australia*. People and Nature



drumlines “provide us with confidence that SMART drumlines are effective in removing the immediate risk to beach users at that beach and other nearby beaches for several months”.²

Seeking urgent review of JMA

Clause 9 of the JMA established in 2017, requires that it will be reviewed every five years. This review was due in 2022 but appears to have not been done. Clause 48.4 of the JMA also requires any review report to be made public.

Since 2017 when the JMA was established, there has been considerable advances in technology with non-invasive shark mitigation devices trialled throughout the Sydney region. Some of these devices, such as SMART drumlines have been shown to be effective in reducing the risk to bathers whilst dramatically reducing the impact to non-target species.

Climate change is also an important consideration that needs to be considered in the review. Our waters are getting warmer and changing species diversity. The public is also likely to be using our beaches throughout the year and not just in the summer periods when shark meshing is used.

The SCCG therefore recommends the NSW Government commits to reviewing the JMA in consultation with the public so that a debate around the use of non-invasive methods which reduce impacts to non-target species and changes to beach use can occur in an open and transparent manner.

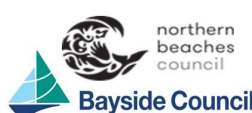
The SCCG also recommends that the NSW Government engages with SCCG and its members regarding an evidence-based solution to bather protection. This can be arranged by contacting the SCCG’s Executive Officer by email at executiveofficer@sydneycoastalcouncils.com.au

Yours sincerely,



Councillor Jack Boyd
Chair, SCCG

² <https://www.sharksmart.nsw.gov.au/technology-trials-and-research/smart-drumlines>





2022-23 Shark Management Program Summary

Waverley Council

