

Sailing the Sharkish Seas

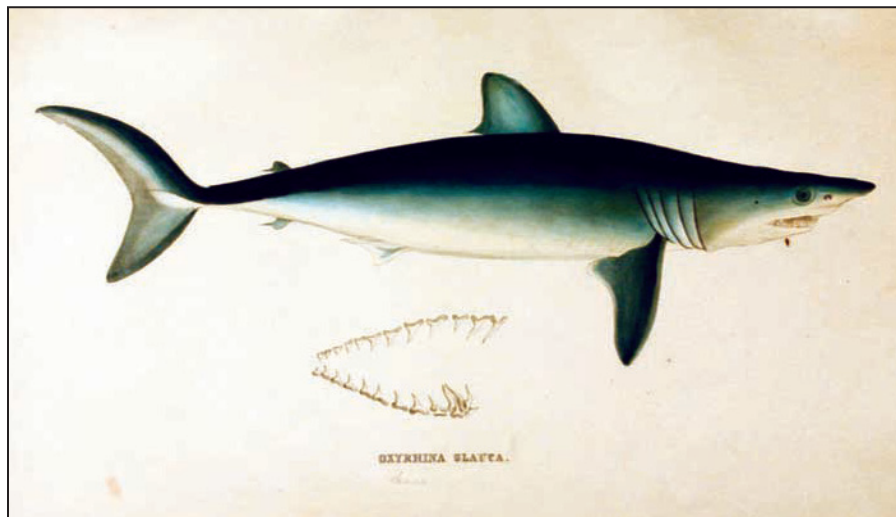
by Emma McCauley

The 19th-Century Whaleman's Experience with the Most Feared

Marine biology student Emma McCauley recently spent a semester at the Williams College-Mystic Seaport Maritime Studies program. At Mystic, she found the opportunity to approach marine life from a more historical point of view, particularly studying the attitudes of whaleship crews towards the creatures with which they shared the ocean. Here, she discusses the relationship between whalers and sharks.

A common story told in field guides and Wikipedia-style popular entries on sharks is that few thought much of these ocean predators until the early twentieth century, when sharks made headlines as killers of swimmers off beaches and of shipwrecked sailors floating in the sea during wartime. It wasn't until the premier of Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975) terrified audiences across the nation that the perception of an insatiable, ferocious beast was solidified, and our horrible image of the shark, however created and culturally learned, is now difficult to shake.

A twentieth-century start date for the shark's modern-day image problem in the US fails to account for the experience of American whalers sailing in the nineteenth century. Sailors hated sharks more than any other animal, reserving a level of cruelty that they inflicted on no other organism. For crewmembers aboard whale-



Hand-painted plate of a short-fin mako shark that appeared in Systematic Description of Cartilaginous Fishes (1838) by German anatomists Johannes Müller and Jacob Henle, one of the first modern works on sharks.

ships, their particular familiarity bred contempt. And they brought their horrifying stories home and spread the word among landsmen of the shark's terrifying role in the sea.

A look through whalers' logbooks gives a more complete understanding of this contentious relationship. By and large, logbook entries contained brief, formal notes, primarily recording the ship's position, the day's weather, and any significant catches or events of the day. Occasionally, however, the men recorded the sighting of a shark, and on occasion were more specific, denoting a "brown shark," "shovel-nosed shark," or another common name that is now difficult to attribute to a given species.

It was not until I read the more personal journals and published narratives about life onboard whaleships that I got a real sense of how sharks were perceived. The majority of these passages discuss gruesome scenes of the whalers' practice of

Francis Allyn Olmsted made dozens of sketches and took copious notes during his time aboard the whaleship North America, including many observations of sharks and the way his shipmates viewed them. He published them, including this sketch of his ship, in Incidents of a Whaling Voyage in 1841.



of Ocean Predators

“cutting in” the bloody carcass of a recently killed whale to remove strips of blubber to render into oil. While the men were perched on greasy cutting stages over the side of the ship, the water below was filled with sharks struggling to make a meal out of the fresh carcass. The risk that scavenging sharks posed to the whalemens dangling just over their heads was such a regular occurrence that it was not even worth mentioning in ships’ logbooks. Herman Melville, one of the many whalemens who experienced ravenous sharks, devotes a full chapter, titled “The Shark Massacre,” to the scene in his novel *Moby-Dick* (1851).

One of the most detailed published accounts I read was that of Francis Allyn Olmsted, who had just graduated from Yale when he shipped aboard a whaling vessel bound for the Pacific in 1839, in the hopes of improving his health. His father was a professor of mathematics and natural philosophy at Yale, so Olmsted had grown up with an eye toward observation and natural history. In his *Incidents of a Whaling Voyage* (1841), Olmsted gave a rich description not only of the sharks he saw, but also of how the crew thought about them. He described how, with a hook and chain, he captured six or seven “peak-nosed sharks,” which he said were also known as “blue sharks.” The sharks had gathered around a dead sperm whale that the crew had lashed alongside Olmsted’s whaleship, *North America*. While Olmsted did not give a scientific name, the details he included



PUBLISHED IN WHALE FISHERY OF NEW ENGLAND, PUBLISHED IN 1915 BY THE STATE STREET TRUST COMPANY, BOSTON, MA, U.S.A.

The task of “cutting in” a whale required crewmen to stand outboard of the ship’s topsides, perched on greasy stages over the dead whale. It was a dangerous job and often became a race between the whalemens and the sharks that came to scavenge the carcass under their feet. If the sharks made quick work of it, they literally ate into the whalemens’ profits.



about coloration, jaws, and fin placement match today’s Blue shark, *Prionace glauca*. Olmsted spent time describing the shark’s behavior and commenting on how it swam, ate, and breathed. While he ultimately deemed them to be “ravenous monsters,” Olmsted noted that this species rarely bites humans, unless they put themselves in harm’s way in the flurry of bloody water. He summed up the American whalemens’ relationship with sharks:

The shark in all his varieties, is regarded with inveterate hatred by the sailor, and is considered a legitimate subject for the exercise



Drawing from the logbook of the whaling ship Clara Bell, depicting ravenous sharks during the process of cutting in. The 295-ton barque left Mattapoisett, Massachusetts, in 1855, bound for the whaling ground of the Atlantic and Indian Oceans.

of his skill in darting a lance or spade, to which this savage animal is admirably adapted from his apparent insensibility to pain. At the repeated gashes he receives

from these formidable instruments, he manifests the utmost indifference and calm composure, and even with a large hook in his mouth he still continues to exer-

cise his voracious propensities. Aboard whale ships, sometimes, upon the capture of a shark during the process of trying out, he is drawn out of the water by two or three men, and a gallon or more of boiling oil is poured down his open mouth, a most cruel act, but defended on the ground that "nothing is too bad for a shark."¹

Olmsted's impression of how American whalers saw and treated sharks is representative of dozens of other primary accounts. In addition to their fear of losing life or limb, whalers recognized a shark's ability to eat a large portion of their ship's profits. William Morris Davis, who crewed aboard a whaleship in 1872, explained: "At each mouthful a quart of sperm-oil was lost to us, and we went to work with lances and spades to stop the

A Great White shark tears into the fluke of a dead Bryde's whale off South Africa.



PHOTO BY CHRIS FALLOWS, PLOS ONE, (CC)

leak.”² The resulting competition bred between sharks and whalers was not only practical, but personal; oil lost at the jaws of a shark meant a longer voyage for a crew eager to return home.

This ever-present frustration and danger led to a zombie-like image of sharks, which made its way back to popular works ashore beyond sailor’s narratives. Naturalist Samuel Maunders wrote in his 1852 encyclopedic work *The Treasury of History, Being A History of the World* that “[sharks] devour with indiscriminating voracity almost every animal substance, whether living or dead.”³ The popular *Book of Nature* (1826), seemingly the first book read by the second mate of the *Charles W. Morgan* after boarding in 1841, explains that the shark is “the most dreadful tyrant of the ocean,” devouring everything. It claimed that the “white shark” can grow up to thirty feet long, weigh 4,000 pounds, and can “swallow a man whole at a mouthful.” (The longest trusted measurement of the Great White’s length is about 19.5 feet)⁴.

It was a commonly held idea in the nineteenth century, and perhaps still, that sharks do not feel pain. Numerous accounts, in both the writings of naturalists and in the logbooks kept by whalers, mention that after being stabbed or maimed, sharks either swam off as if nothing had happened, or even continued eating. In contrast, whales, considered by some to be monsters themselves, would react wildly to being harpooned. The sharks’ seemingly unaffected response to mutilation, along with their single-mindedness in eating, seemed to eradicate any reservations whalers may have felt about killing them.

John Ross Browne, a journalist and artist who worked as a whaler and then published a narrative in 1846, led with a frontispiece that depicts open-mouthed sharks thrashing around a whale as the men cut in. Browne described a particular shark that his shipmates mutilated after it ate a large amount of a whale they had killed. In response to losing its tail, the “monster did not appear to be particularly concerned at this indignity, but, sliding back into his native element, very leisurely swam off, to the great amusement of his comrades, who pursued him with every variant of gyrations.”



Aquatint by William Daniel, published in Zoography; or The Beauties of Nature Displayed by W. Wood, F.L.S., 1807. In the description on sharks that went with this illustration, Wood wrote: “The shark is by far the fiercest and most voracious of the finny tribe; he is formed for destruction, and, having a very strong appetite for mischief, is constantly seeking to gratify it. Thus, he prowls about in the warmer part of the ocean, to the great terror of the rest of its inhabitants, as well as to the human race; whose bodies have been too frequently buried in the stomach of this formidable creature.”

The perception of sharks as cruel and callous made them desirable targets for whalers looking to break up the monotony of life at sea. Sometimes this meant just “a little sport in... catching a shark,” as Lucy Ann Crapo, the captain’s wife of the barque *Louisa*, observed in 1866. Catching a shark, however, did not carry the same significance onboard a whaleship as fishing for tuna, since sharks were rarely eaten. Mary Brewster, who went to sea on two voyages aboard the *Tiger* with her whaleship-captain husband, wrote in her journal in 1848 that the crew “caught a large shark which was playing astern, it was soon dispatched and thrown overboard. The delight of the sailor is to kill every one they can get.”⁵ While mariners were able to use a shark’s liver for oil and its skin for sandpaper, the primary objectives of catching sharks seemed to be both to relieve boredom and to get revenge on the creatures. Occasionally, whalers went a step further. Some published accounts, such as those by William Morris Davis, recount stories of torture, where whalers would stick a rod down a shark’s throat before tossing it back overboard, still alive.

The science of the time seemed largely in accord with contemporary mariners’ assessments about the ferocity of sharks.

One of the most influential publications in the nineteenth century was by the French naturalist Georges Cuvier. Though he had never been to sea himself in any substantial way, in *The Animal Kingdom* (1835), Cuvier made species-specific observations about the teeth, senses, and anatomy of the Great White, hammerhead, basking, and other sharks. While Cuvier commented on the preferred fish species and marine mammal prey of the sharks he wrote about, he also included numerous accounts describing the predators as particularly inclined to human flesh—a characteristic that Olmsted and nearly all whalers, including Melville, never actually connected to sharks. Of the Great White, Cuvier wrote that it often appeared after shipwrecks “with its mouth and throat ready to swallow entire the despairing sailor.”⁶ So voracious was the Great White of Cuvier’s imagination, that it would often beach itself in the pursuit of fleeing prey.

Today there is a wealth of knowledge about the discerning palates, advanced senses, and the important roles sharks serve in marine ecosystems. As apex predators and scavengers, sharks influence many different food webs by limiting the populations of their prey, affecting all animals that feed at lower trophic levels.

Yet even in the twenty-first century, uncertainties about large pelagic sharks persist. Life span, gestation period, and age of sexual maturity are some of the most basic biological questions that remain unanswered about the ocean's most iconic shark, the Great White. The scientific community still debates whether fish, and especially large sharks, are capable of feeling pain.⁷ That we still have some of the same unanswered questions as in the nineteenth century, makes a convincing case for the importance of advancing marine biology research.

Whalemen and sea-going naturalists, such as Olmsted, correctly identified the behavior of individual species such as the Great White shark, Blue shark, and Tiger shark (*Galeocerdo cuvier*), all of which are known scavengers and have ranges that overlap with many of the whaling grounds these ships sailed through. They also understood the utility of the hard, overlapping plates that make up shark's skin, which they dried out and used as sandpaper.

The data that nineteenth-century whalemen and naturalists collected continue to serve researchers today. While advances in diving technology and surveying techniques have pushed the boundaries in how sharks can be studied, scientific research cruises are challenging to fund and launch. The whalemen, who were sailing at a time when shark populations probably dwarfed those of today, had more empirical experience with pelagic sharks than most scientists will ever witness in the twenty-first century. As an example, a 2013 research study on instances of Great White sharks scavenging on whale carcasses noted that, since 1896, there have only been nineteen accounts in the primary literature of this type of activity. The fraction of logbooks, journals and accounts I explored seem to support a much higher number than nineteen observations, even on a single voyage.



Convicts attempting an escape from the penal colony on Devil's Island, French Guiana. The island was famous for being guarded by sharks, and the terror that this scene conveys kept most inmates from even considering making the attempt.

As a recent college graduate just beginning my career, I can't help but draw comparisons with Francis Olmsted, who was my age when he went to sea for the first time. Four years of studying ocean processes and ecology have left me with an unshakeable appreciation of sharks and their role in the marine ecosystem. Unlike Olmsted, however, my respect for them was curated in the classroom, with full access to data, analyses, and studies on these marine animals, which have mystified people in both lore and science for hundreds of years. I wonder how my perception of sharks would be altered if I knew them not as the endangered animals they are, but as the plentiful scavengers they were when Olmsted and his shipmates encountered them.

We are still trying to unpack and dismantle the horror movie image of sharks crafted by whalemen, one that has been cemented by centuries of misunderstood

interactions. While scientists and conservationists work on creating a new narrative around sharks, we should not discount these sailors' fearful accounts. Rather, we should appreciate their early endeavors to understand the mysterious creatures when few others were attempting to do the same. ⚓

Emma McCauley graduated in 2017 from Stony Brook University with a degree in Marine Vertebrate Biology and is currently working as an educator at South Street Seaport Museum in New York. Emma wrote this article as a Williams-Mystic student of Glenn Gordinier and as a research assistant to Richard King, who contributed some of his own research and ideas. Rich is the author-illustrator of the Sea History for Kids feature "Animals in Sea History," and his latest book, A Natural History of Moby-Dick (University of Chicago Press) is due for release in 2019. The book includes a chapter, naturally, on Ishmael's sharks.

NOTES

¹ Francis Allyn Olmstead, *Incidents of a Whaling Voyage* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1841) 183–4.

² William Morris Davis, *Nimrod of the Sea* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1874).

³ Richard Ellis (2012), *Shark: A Visual History*. Rowman & Littlefield. p. 60; the

original book on archive.org: Samuel Maunders, *The Treasury of Natural History, or A Popular Dictionary of Animated Nature*, 3rd ed. (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1852), 605.

⁴ Ebert, Fowler, Dando, *A Pocket Guide to Sharks of the World* (Princeton, 2015), 110.

⁵ John Ross Brown, *Etchings of a Whaling Cruise* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1846) 132.

⁶ Georges Cuvier, *Animal Kingdom*, London: Whittaker & Co. 1835.

⁷ www.livescience.com/48341-sharks-feel-pain-but-have-few-protections.html.

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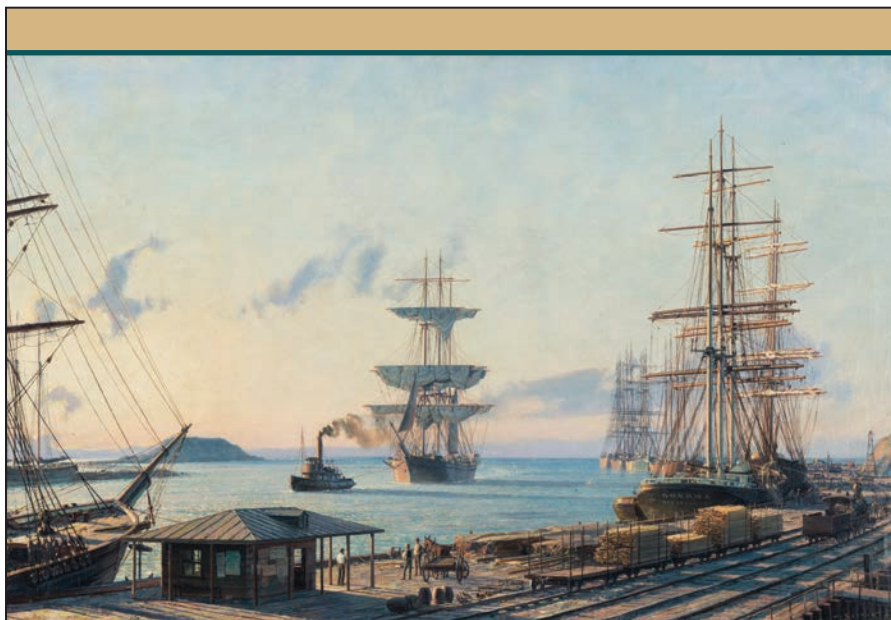


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