

Close to Shore: The Terrifying Shark Attacks of 1916 Study Guide

**Close to Shore: The Terrifying Shark Attacks of 1916
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Plot Summary

Close to Shore - The Terrifying Shark Attacks of 1916 provides the chronicle of the attacks by a great white shark off the Jersey shoreline in the summer of 1916. The first victim during that steamy hot July was Charles Vansant. The son of a prestigious Philadelphia physician, Charles was swimming with his retriever off the coast of Beach Haven when a large marine animal pulled him under the water. He struggled with the beast until he was rescued by a team of lifeguards who managed to bring him ashore. But the young man, who was soon to be married, nearly lost one of his legs and was bleeding profusely. His physician father and two other doctors who were on the scene were at a loss—totally helpless to deal with the severity of the young man's wounds. Charles only lived a short time on shore until he expired. Charles' death was the first in the US to be officially recorded as resulting from a shark attack.

Up the shore from Beach Haven in Spring Lake, Sussex Hotel bell captain Charles Bruder made the mistake of taking a break from his duties and going for a quick swim in the Atlantic. He was attacked presumably by the same shark. Losing both legs in the attack, Bruder also bled to death. The shark continued northward and, fooled by the coastline, entered into the mouth of the Matawan Creek. Sharks cannot survive for an extended period of time in fresh water, but the great white was sustained by the infusion of salt water into the creek during high tides brought on by lunar activity. During the shark's inland rampage, he killed a young teen, Lester Stilwell, and the town's tailor, Stanley Fisher, who was attempting to retrieve Lester's body.

Although it could not be known if one shark was responsible for all the deaths and the many near-misses during those July days of 1916, a great white shark was caught and killed soon after the incidents by a big-game hunter and taxidermist. When he opened up the stomach of the shark, human bones were found inside.

Amazingly, most marine animal experts and experienced fishermen at the time of the attacks initially refused to believe that the attacks and deaths were caused by a shark. Instead, they blamed the attacks on an orca, large sea turtle, swordfish and even a large tuna. Most authorities proclaimed that the shark wasn't capable of such attacks and that it was a "timid" animal. But when the rogue shark was caught with human bones in its stomachs, they all became believers. Following the attacks of 1916 in the north Atlantic, the great white shark became and has remained the ocean's most feared creature.



Chapters 1 and 2

Chapters 1 and 2 Summary and Analysis

The Last Man in the Water

A young man wades out in the Atlantic, his retriever dog alongside his master. The man is young and strong and ventures out in the deep water. Having reached his personal goal, he turns on his back and focuses on the sparkling beach that seems so far away. He hasn't a care in the world—only that he misses his beloved. But their wedding is planned and they will soon be reunited. Suddenly, he is alone—his dog is nowhere in sight.

Let Us Do Justice to Sharks

The great white swims furtively in the water—its dark top matches the sea and from beneath, its white underbelly blends with the sun. The great white, barely altered through the ages, has been swimming in the waters since the Age of Reptiles. The great white is rare and sits atop the food chain. The ocean would indeed be a dangerous place if the species was plentiful. The great white that attacked the swimmer in 1916 was probably born in the Atlantic around 1908. In 1916, most people had never seen a shark. Few had seen photos or even drawings. Many in the early twentieth century began to think that man-eating sea creatures were more myth than reality.

In July 1891, the luxury yacht, *Hildegard*, set off on an outing in the Atlantic off the New York coast. On board were the architect Stanford White, New York Sun publisher Charles Dana, and close friend Theodore Roosevelt. The owner and captain of the yacht was the wealthy shipping mogul Hermann Oelrichs. One of Oelrichs' goals was to debunk the myth that sharks were man-eaters. He felt certain that their bad publicity stemmed from pure fantasy. He had offered a reward of \$500 for proof that any person had ever been attacked by a shark. As the yacht sailed into deep waters, the fins of several sharks were spotted. Oelrichs dived in among them and, amazingly, he swam and splashed among them unharmed, chasing the large sharks away. He felt he had made his point.

Later scientists attributed Oelrichs' success to the probability that the sharks were small, non-aggressive species. Word spread about the experiment with the conclusion that sharks were no match for men. By the time Oelrichs died in 1906, there was no proof of the shark's danger to man had been produced. In 1915, a New York Times editorial titled, "Let Us Do Justice To Sharks," cited the fact that twenty-five years had passed since Oelrichs' swim with the sharks and no evidence had come forth of a shark attacking a man. Even so, the editorial noted, people had an unnatural fear of sharks. The only known evidence of a shark attack had been a blurry photo of a shark ready to chomp down on a man. The Times editorial ended with the conclusion that sharks did not present a danger to man.

The great white, even in modern times, remains much of a mystery. The force of its bite has never been measured. It is too large and powerful for captivity and therefore, in large part, has escaped scientific scrutiny.



Chapters 3 and 4

Chapters 3 and 4 Summary and Analysis

A Missile of Teeth

As was the shark that was eventually responsible for the 1916 attacks, newly born white sharks measure up to five feet and weigh up to eight-five pounds. As soon as they are born, they display predatory behaviors. Though young sharks can seem slow-moving, when stimulated they can reach speeds of thirty miles per hour. The thousands of denticles that cover their skin aid in their maneuverability and speed. As the waters turn frigid, the great whites of the North Atlantic migrate southward. The immature shark's head expands rapidly. Twenty-six teeth are contained in the top row and twenty-four in the bottom row. Successive rows of additional teeth are poised behind the functional teeth, ready to replace them when they are discarded. Every two or three weeks, a new, serrated set of teeth replaces the current set. The hungry white shark's appetite is difficult to sate. As the young shark develops, his hunger turns him away from fish and toward larger prey such as seals and dolphins, which offer a diet of rich blubber.

By eight years of age, the white shark nearly doubles in size, making it nearly invincible in its environment. The only known creatures that on rare occasions are known to attack great whites of this size are larger great whites, sperm whales and orcas. While juvenile white sharks stay close to shore, more mature members of the species are open-ocean travelers. While the young shark is off the coast of Florida, it may be caught in the warm Gulf Stream currents, the high temperature of which makes it uncomfortable and struggle to hunt and feed.

A Train to the Coast

Thousands of working-class men and women migrated across downtown Philadelphia to the coast on the first day of July 1916. The beach-goers of that year made up the largest gathering in the region to date. The wealthy family of Dr. Eugene Vansant rode in a Pullman with their nannies and servants for a stay in Beach Haven. Mrs. Vansant was somewhat concerned about the possible ruckus on the Jersey Shore due to the hordes of visitors expected and a controversy over some young women who were going to be parading around in revealing beach wear.

Beach life had deteriorated in some minds from the many young people visiting, who engaged in heavy drinking and dancing to suggestive songs. Victorian mores were being abandoned in favor of the liberal behavior of younger generations. Women were exposing their arms and legs and wearing scandalous clinging wool suits. The Vansants stayed at the stylish Engleside Hotel, where the upper crust enjoyed their respite on the coast amid rumors that German U-boats were patrolling offshore. Eugene and Louisa Vansant strolled along the boardwalk with her daughters at dusk while their eldest child, Charles, romped with the family dog in the waters off the beach.



Chapters 5 and 6

Chapters 5 and 6 Summary and Analysis

The Sea Monster

The shark that attacked in 1916 had returned from the southern waters where he had suffered in his competition with many larger predators. He was tossed northward by the strong current of the Gulf Stream. Many years later, ichthyologist George Burgess concluded that the shark was a rouge, serial killer, but in the rhetoric of the day, the shark was a sea monster.

Since it was unusual for the young white shark to be close to the shore in July 1916, experts later theorized that the lone predator was led toward shore by scents and currents and hunger. This was a plausible explanation for the presence of a shark near the shoreline for several reasons: A plethora of organisms washed inland and the fish industry trapped tons of fish close to shore with large nets. The scent of this prey would have gained the attention of the enormous olfactory lobes located in the shark's brain. The animal can smell prey a quarter-mile away. A new smell, the scent of human waste that was dumped into the waters, also would have piqued the interest of the shark.

The people irrationally linked the great white attack to German U-Boats—one of which made it through the English blockade to the coastal waters of America and terrorized the citizens even though it only carried cargo.

The Nightmare of Centuries

Charles and the dog swam to the diving platform that the Engleside hotel had installed for its guests. The shark, equipped with a sensitive line of nerves embedded in his head, was able to pick up infinitesimal sounds and vibrations, headed closer. As the shark neared, he picked up mixed scents and evidence that mammals were present in the water. Since the incident, experts have determined that swimmers who swim with dogs are at greater risk from shark attack due to the dog's erratic movements in the water—a signal that the shark takes as an animal in distress. Being a lone swimmer, Charles was made more vulnerable to attack. Suddenly, the dog who was probably fatigued, headed to shore and left Charles truly alone.

People on the beach noticed that a dark fin was following closely behind Charles as he began to swim ashore. They became alarmed as it continued and tried to warn the young man. Charles sensed that he was being followed and probably felt he had reached safety when he was within only three and one-half feet of water. But the shark attacked, biting Charles below the knee. Soon they were both swirling in a pool of blood. Charles screamed, grabbing the attention of more people, including his parents. As beach goers ran in to try to pull Charles ashore, the shark with bits of Charles' flesh in



his mouth, backed off and seemed to wait. Like many predators, it was saving energy—waiting for its prey to bleed to death.

The first to reach Charles was Alexander Ott. He towed Charles toward the shore but was suddenly stopped cold. On the other end of Charles was the shark. It had reappeared and clamped down on Charles' thigh. Ott and the shark were literally playing tug of war with Charles' body. Ott estimated that the shark was ten feet long and weighed around 500 pounds. It was very powerful. More men rushed into the water to help pull Charles in. The shark stayed in the struggle until its underside was scraping the sand. Suddenly the shark let go of Charles, submerged itself and was gone. Charles was bleeding profusely and his left leg had nearly been torn off.

Dr. Vansant rushed to his son. He knew he had to stop the bleeding or there was no hope for his son. He took strips of cloth from a woman's dress to use as a tourniquet. The blood continued to gush. Two more doctors joined Vansant, but were both at a loss. They decided to move Charles indoors where they would have access to water, soap and bandages. But Charles had lost too much blood and died from shock and hemorrhaging. There was disagreement among the public as to what killed Charles. Some thought a shark was the culprit, others were convinced that a large sea turtle was the predator while some thought it was a rouge tuna. But the official cause of death was listed as "shark bite." It was the first official record of a shark attack that resulted in death.



Chapters 7 and 8

Chapters 7 and 8 Summary and Analysis

Detection and Concealment

The very next day, Gertrude Schuyler, from New York City, and her family were at a resort across from the spot where the shark had killed Charles Vansant. Nothing had appeared in the paper yet and word about the attack had not spread. It was suspected that the hotel kept down word of the incident to avoid depressing the tourist trade. Gertrude was unaware of the incident and that a killer shark was stalking the coast line. There were some 50,000 people in the water the day following the attack on Charles Vansant. As Gertrude stroked along parallel to the coastline, she was suddenly pulled under water. She resurfaced and screamed just once. Lifeguards and volunteers fortunately heard her and in minutes were able to rescue her. Miraculously, she was not injured, although she nearly drowned. The next day, articles appeared in both the New York Times and the Philadelphia Inquirer about the shark attack—but were hidden on back pages. The headline in the Times read, "Dies After Attack by Fish." One fact that made the thought of men being killed or eaten by sharks unrealistic to many was that such attacks had always occurred away from civilization and were virtually unrecorded. Shark attacks were considered the tall tales of sailors and uncivilized people.

The Distance Swimmers

Forty-five miles up the coast from Beach Haven, the New Essex and Sussex Hotel occupied a large piece of real estate on the coast of Spring Lake. In just a few days, word had spread up the coast about the shark attack on Charles Vansant. Some hotel guests worried about the incident, others were sure the incident had been exaggerated and that the young man had drowned. Black and dark blue were the most popular colors for bathing suits, which were the exact colors of marine animals that the shark savored.

Long distance swimmer, Robert W. Dowling, nineteen, announced he would swim out four miles in the Atlantic—sharks be damned! Leonard Hill planned to swim out a quarter-mile from the coast and then five miles due south. The shark had traveled fifty miles north from Beach Haven. It was hungry and was picking up sounds, vibrations and unusual scents. It is common to see sharks along the Atlantic coast. But providence was with the two long distance swimmers on July 6, 1916. They both returned to shore safe and unharmed. But the shark was still on the prowl. After the two swimmers learned what danger they had been in, they changed their vacation plans immediately. Dowling swore he would never swim in the ocean again.



Chapters 9 and 10

Chapters 9 and 10 Summary and Analysis

"He's a Big Fellow and Awful Hungry"

The Sussex Hotel's young bell captain, Charles Bruder, decided to slip away for an afternoon swim. He wanted to outdo Dowling's recent swim. Since his staff wasn't busy, he gave several bellmen a break to join him. The shark attack of Charles Vansant was a topic of conversation among the men. Bruder boasted that he was not afraid of sharks, having swum with them off the coast of California, and was certain that Vansant had not been killed by a shark.

Bruder swam with great speed, past the safety ropes and soon almost out of sight. Bruder's movement through the water caught the attention of the great white, who was on patrol. Perhaps the light flickering off the palms of Bruder's hands and bottoms of his feet looked like fast-moving fish to the hungry predator; or, the shape and color of the swimmer may have resembled a seal. The shark attacked from behind with a fury. Someone on shore thought they saw a red canoe tip over. When the rescuers reached the spot where Bruder was attacked, they realized that the "red" the people saw was a large circle of blood. The shark had attacked repeatedly, but the men were able to pull Bruder into the boat. Both his feet were gone. The men couldn't stop the bleeding and rowed ashore as fast as they could. Charles Bruder lost consciousness on the way back to the shore.

10 Out of the Water

The hotel manager, David B. Plumer, immediately ordered his telephone operators to notify the operators in all the hotels on the north and central coast. Hotel lifeguards ordered everyone out of the water. Doctors were dispatched to the beach to tend to Bruder. With both legs gone and a large bite in his torso, there was nothing the doctors could do. Bruder soon expired. Bruder's injuries and death were recorded and attributed to shark bite. The damage was so severe, a class one injury, that even with modern medical procedures, he could not have been saved. The Governor's staff physician, Dr. William G. Schauffler, completed the official report and immediately ordered that a patrol be formed to hunt down and kill the shark. News spread of the horrific incident, but some fishermen swore that it wasn't a shark that killed the man but some other sea animal like a swordfish or turtle. Many thought the shark was a timid animal and would not attack.

Noted ichthyologist Dr. John Treadwell Nichols was called in to investigate the attack. Amazingly, Dr. Nichols, after viewing Bruder's wounds, concluded that the young man's death was caused by the attack of an orca, a killer whale.

Chapters 11 and 12

Chapters 11 and 12 Summary and Analysis

Arrival of a Man-Eater

The juvenile shark that killed Bruder had probably been frightened off by the rescue boat. A mature great white would not have been. If he ate Bruder's legs, it would not have kept him satisfied for very long. Either way, he was hungry and still on the hunt. The shark craved large mammals rich with blubber, but the North Atlantic region did not offer him many such choices. Man is not a desirable part of a shark's diet. In most cases, white sharks dislike the taste of humans and spit them out.

On July 7, 1916, a small group of men and their boats were organized to hunt the man-eater down. The men spread trails of blood behind their boats. Chunks of meat were strapped to the boats as gunmen stood waiting for the shark to surface. Despite their efforts, the beaches were abandoned. The attack made the headlines in the newspapers. The New York Times sensationalized the incident by describing in detail the gore of the attack. The shark hunters spotted a large fin and shot at it repeatedly, but it submerged and disappeared under the water.

Myths of Antiquity

In New York City, some newspaper reporters visited the office of Dr. Frederic Augustus Lucas, director of the American Museum of Natural History. Lucas had sent Dr. Nichols to the scene of the shark attack on Charles Bruder. The reporters had endless questions about man-eating sharks for Dr. Lucas. He insisted that a shark could not inflict the damage that Bruder suffered. Lucas and some of his assistants had witnessed sharks first hand and had observed how difficult it was for them to tear flesh from dead carcasses. Therefore, he concluded, a shark could not have bitten off a human leg.



Chapters 13 and 14

Chapters 13 and 14 Summary and Analysis

A Long-Range Cruising Rogue

As the shark-patrol steered its motorboats back and forth, hunting for the shark, the shark was picking up the many vibrations and sensations that the boats were causing. The sensations could have signaled that an abundant number of prey was available to the shark. The men shot at several animals in the water. The men could have very well had the man-eating shark in its cross-hairs since it was commonly accepted that the shark had stayed in the area. But it's difficult to catch serial-killing man-eating sharks. The water conceals their crimes and aids in their escape. Through the years, there has been vigorous disagreement about whether there is such a thing as a man-eating shark.

Dr. Sir Victor Coppleson, an Australian surgeon, coined the phrase "rouge shark," feeling there was evidence that if a shark experiences killing or mauling humans, he goes in search of more human prey. Coppleson based his theory on the incidence of shark attacks that occurred after the advent of the sport of surfing in 1919. In 1922, two surfers were attacked and killed at the same location, Coogee Beach, by large sharks that struck them with such force that they were lifted from the water. Several other swimmers lost limbs in the same area. When the attacks stopped, Coppleson took it as evidence that the attacks were by the same rouge shark that had either died or moved on.

Coppleson applied his theory to many locales around the world, including South Africa, Puerto Rico and the United States. Coppleson cited the North Atlantic attacks of 1916 as those of a rouge shark, even though many American experts maintained the belief that the deaths of the swimmers were not caused by sharks. Scientists have recently theorized that shark attacks may be caused by changes in coastal water temperatures that draws sharks close to shorelines where swimmers and surfers are. The juvenile white shark was not finished with the North Atlantic shores. Coppleson would one day refer to these attacks as those by the "mad shark" of New Jersey.

The Shark Scare

To keep swimmers safe, a wire mesh net was being constructed from sea bottom to high-tide level in the Asbury Park area. It hadn't been completed at the Asbury Avenue beach yet, but that area was being patrolled by Benjamin Everingham, who rowed back and forth, keeping his eye out for a fin breaking the water. He had been instructed to bring a rifle and ax along but, like many others, thought there was no real threat and failed to bring any weapons. During his patrol, and much to his surprise, he saw a gray fin cut the surface and speed right toward his boat. He struck the shark with one of his oars. As it rolled over, he struck it again. He had become a believer by the time he rowed frantically to shore. That section of the beach was immediately closed. Even



sections of the beach that were protected by the mesh wire were soon abandoned by frightened tourists.

The same day as Everingham's encounter with the shark, a group of kids saw a large fin heading for the a group of children near a float that extended off a clubhouse. A police lieutenant, Dennis Colohan, aimed at the advancing shark, emptying his revolver into its head. It did deter the shark—it turned to the open sea—but the bullets didn't penetrate sufficiently to kill it. A famous swimming star, Annette Kellerman, warned parents to raise their children to be afraid of sharks, that they were an inherent danger.

By July 9th, bathers returned and ventured back into the water, seeming to forget about the recent attacks. Asbury Park advertised that their waters were safe from sharks. The US Bureau of Fisheries declared that people should not be deterred from going into the waters since "sharks were not vicious" (p. 82). Sharks were deemed to be less a threat to man than horses and dogs.



Chapters 15 and 16

Chapters 15 and 16 Summary and Analysis

Hunger or Madness

The beating with the oar and the gunshots had, like some old-time fishermen predicted, probably caused the shark to drift north. The shark may not have been hungry for a short while as it may have been storing parts of the two men it had half-eaten, much like a camel stores water. There was a report of a thirteen-foot tiger shark that was towed ashore while still alive regurgitating, among other items, a well-preserved human arm. The great white can grow to twenty feet or more and weigh several tons. It lives a long life, free of cancer, infections and other disease. Its wounds heal remarkably fast. Yet the juvenile shark that attacked the men may have sensed that it wouldn't survive in the open ocean; and, therefore, turned toward the coast when it reached Sandy Hook Bay on its northward migration. It would eventually experience weakness and sluggishness due to lack of nourishment.

Confused by the coastline, the shark swam into the mouth of a creek. White sharks cannot survive in fresh water, where they lose the salt balance between their own body and the fresh water. Unable to return to the open sea, the shark's fading condition worsened as it headed down the creek for the small community of Matawan.

The Creek

The town of Matawan was located seventeen miles from the coast. It was a typical small town with a few factories and industries that offered enough jobs to employ the men and women of the community. On July 11, 1916, Renny Cartan, Jr., his cousin Johnson Cartan, and some other friends took off for the swimming hole at Matawan Creek. Renny jumped in the cool, dark waters but soon had a strange sensation tearing across his chest—something he had never experienced before or was able to identify. The splashing of the boys had drawn the shark, which bumped Renny, probably to get a sense of his size. Renny spotted something very large swimming near him and scrambled out of the water, bleeding from being scraped by the teeth-like covering on the shark's body. The other boys didn't believe something hit him in the water—they thought he was scraped by a branch. Renny ran back to town to tend to his wound, yelling at the other boys not go back in the water. They didn't listen and jumped back in, again making noises and vibrations that came to the immediate attention of the shark.

The next morning, retired Sea Captain Thomas V. Cottrell was walking along the bank of the creek. He had heard about Renny claiming there was a big fish in the creek, but as most everyone else in town did, he dismissed it. To his astonishment, Cottrell saw a huge shark, gray-brown in coloring, swimming up the creek toward the town. He had heard about the recent attacks along the shore and wondered if it could be the same shark. He raced toward town to warn everyone. Everyone he told thought he was pulling



their legs or had gone crazy. The townspeople went on to enjoy their daily dip in the creek. Cottrell ran to his motorboat and steered it up and down the creek, looking for the shark and warning the swimmers. A lunar eclipse would be occurring on July 14th that year. The shark could have been reacting to the lunar pull, which caused high tides running up even into the creek, providing an influx of salt water in to the creek giving the shark new life. Evidence later surfaced that sharks are more likely to attack during high tides.



Chapters 17 and 18

Chapters 17 and 18 Summary and Analysis

An Uneven Battle

Lester Stilwell left his job in the factory and met his friends at the creek. Lester was floating on his back in the creek when his friend, Charlie Van Brunt saw "the biggest, blackest fish he had ever seen" (p. 96) strike his friend. The shark shook Lester like a rag doll. Lester surfaced once and screamed for help but he was dragged right back under. The boys ran into town and told Constable Mulsoff what had happened. He took a group of men to save Lester or recover what was left of him. The boys ran to Stanley Fisher, who was the best swimmer in town. Fisher immediately closed his tailor shop and ran to the creek. Fisher set up a barrier of chicken wire down creek so the boy's body wouldn't wash out to sea. Fisher and fisherman George Burlew made repeated dives into the murky water but could not find Lester.

Just before they gave up, Fisher decided to dive one more time. He resurfaced and told Lester's waiting parents and the others that had gathered that he found the boy. Just then, he was attacked and taken under by the shark. Fisher was an athletically built man and battled valiantly against the shark. He was finally able to get away from it and was carrying what was left of Lester to the shore when the shark attacked again. Fisher got away again but the shark took Lester back with him. Most of the flesh on Fisher's thigh from his hip to his knee was gone. When a doctor was finally rounded up, he observed that the bone was not severed but his femoral artery was bleeding profusely. Fisher was placed on a train to the nearest hospital, which was ten miles away. The doctor doubted that he would survive the trip.

"I Thought It Was Going to Swallow Me"

After the attacks on Lester Stilwell and Stanley Fisher, dozens of men were patrolling the Matawan Creek in search of the shark and warning people to stay out of the water. Joseph Dunn, his brother Michael and their friend Jerry Hollohan in Cliffwood, a community downstream from the town of Matawan, had missed the warnings and cut through the woods for a quick swim in the creek. The three boys were in the water when a passing boater warned them of the danger. Michael and Jerry made it out but just as Joseph was nearing the bank, something large bumped and scratched him. Suddenly, Joseph was being pulled down by his leg. His brother Michael and a rescuer, Jacob Lefferts, both leaped in the water and tried to wrest Joseph from the shark's mouth. They were able to pull Joseph out and onto Captain Cottrell's boat.



Chapters 19 and 20

Chapters 19 and 20 Summary and Analysis

To See Its Body Drawn Up on the Shore

Wire nets were placed at the mouth of the creek so the shark could not escape. Men all over the region were reaching for their rifles and harpoons to hunt the beast down and kill it. A one-hundred dollar reward was offered by the mayor of Matawan for the person who killed it. Men on the banks prepared dynamite explosives that would surely end the man-eater's days. The men thought once the shark was killed, it would surface, not aware that sharks have no flotation capability and sink when they die.

Dr. Herbert Cooley at Keyport tended to Joseph when he was brought ashore. Joseph's calf muscle received a large bite. The doctor treated the wound and had Joseph rushed to the hospital. The men began launching dynamite blasts in various parts of the creek. In the meantime, Stanley Fisher was rushed into the operating room at Long Beach, but minutes after surgery began, he died from massive blood loss. Out of fear and frustration, more townspeople came to the creek with rifles and began firing randomly into the water.

Hearing about the attacks, ichthyologist John Nichols drove from New York City to the Matawan Creek. He stopped at the mouth of the creek where the shark would have leave to return to the open waters. Nichols still maintained that an orca was responsible for the attacks. He soon realized that the size of the creek would not accommodate a killer whale. Eyewitnesses described the physical features of a shark when Nichols interviewed them. Nichols was being forced to abandon his theory that a killer whale was the man-eater. Ed Craven, walking along the bank of the creek, had just about given up on the shark when he saw something bobbing in the water. It was Lester. Craven took the boy's remains home to his parents. A service was held and he was buried that night. A large portion of his body had been eaten away. A large hole was chewed out in the wire net and the chunks of meat used for bait were gone.

The Shark Emergency

The shark withstood the vengeance of man and days enduring life-threatening fresh water and made its way to Raritan Bay, which was located between New Jersey and Staten Island. The bay, alive with activity, piqued the senses of the shark. The many boats stimulated the shark—drawn to them by their size, flashing propellers and electromagnetic impulses. Great whites are known for attacking boats. On July 14, a frazzled fisherman limped his battered boat to shore with a stunning tale of having been attacked by an eight-foot shark which likely was the man-eater responsible for the recent attacks.



Gertrude Hoffman waded into the water off Coney Island. No sooner had she begun swimming when she saw a large, dark fin heading right for her. She remembered reading that splashing at the water could fend off an attack and began furiously beating the water. The shark turned away and Gertrude made it to safety. Panic over sharks was spreading across New Jersey and New York. A man reported that he jumped into a motorboat seconds before a speeding fin closed in on him. By Saturday, July 15, Coney Island and Brighton Beach had lost an estimated 50,000 beach goers, replaced by gangs of men armed with guns and spears bent on killing sharks.

Dozens of sharks were hunted down and slaughtered. Congress and the White House were besieged by thousands of requests for help in ridding the New Jersey shore of sharks. The Jersey Shore tourist business was plummeting, which was depressing the state's overall economy. The New Jersey governor held a press conference announcing that the shoreline was being attacked by more than one sea monster and that his administration had no answer for the danger that existed. President Wilson weighed in by establishing the "US war on sharks" (p. 125) headed by his Treasury Secretary, William Gibbs McAdoo who dispatched a Coast Guard unit, the Mohawk, to the Jersey Shore to "rout out sea terrors" (p. 125). The Coast Guard's involvement proved ineffective and the program was soon abandoned. The Federal government's advice was for the coastal cities was to construct net barriers and for the people to stay out of areas that were not netted.



Chapters 21 and 22 and Epilogue

Chapters 21 and 22 and Epilogue Summary and Analysis

Fishing

On July 14th, famed big-game hunter and taxidermist Michael Schleisser set out with fisherman John Murphy on their eight-foot wooden motorboat on a fishing expedition in Raritan Bay. When the men reached the bay, they cast a six-foot trawling net. They traveled within four miles of the mouth of Matawan Creek. Suddenly the boat slammed to a halt, immediately killing the motor. The net had caught something, something very big, that was literally pulling the boat back and downward. They were astonished to see that they had netted a huge shark. Murphy put his weight on the stern to keep the craft from tipping over. Schleisser grabbed a broken oar that was in the boat. As he made his way toward the stern, he was shocked to see that the shark had risen out of water and onto the stern, snapping its huge jaws.

The boat was rocking so fiercely from the thrashing of the shark that Schleisser was having a difficult time steadying himself so he could beat the beast with his oar. Finally, getting a few blows in, the shark lunged closer to Schleisser, barely missing him. The shark's head grazed his arm, the denticles cutting into his flesh. When the shark lunged further into the boat, Schleisser was able to beat the shark. It finally died and slid back down into the net. They towed the dead shark back toward shore. The famous hunter told those on shore that his battle with the shark was the biggest challenge of his life, bar none. Schleisser and Murphy had the help of several other men on the dock in hoisting the beast ashore.

In the meantime, John Nichols headed his own search for the sea monster, finally admitting that it was a great white shark he was hunting. Assisted by Robert Murphy, Nichols set out for Jamaica Bay on July 20th, armed with guns, knives and harpoons. Nichols soon spotted a shark a few boat lengths ahead. He was not convinced that a harpoon would bring down a huge shark. As they neared the creature, they saw that it was a harmless sand shark and held fire. The men continued their hunt but failed to track down a great white.

The Shark Would Endure

Schleisser hauled the shark home to his taxidermy studio. The shark was 7 ½ feet long and weighed in at 350 pounds. He cut the shark's belly open and found human bones and remains that together weighed fifteen pounds. Four days later, he had completed the taxidermy of the shark. He had alerted the local newspaper about his experience and brought the mounted shark to the "Home News" offices, where they displayed it was in their front window next to a pile of bones found in its stomach. Schleisser had sent some of the bones to Dr. Lucas for analysis. A short while later, Schleisser received



confirmation that the remains were indeed human. There was controversy among the experts as to the type and age of the bones found inside the shark, spawning doubt in some minds that the shark was the man-eater that had been on the recent rampage.

At the one year anniversary of the attacks, Rockaway park swimmers spied a large fin in the water. They quickly fled the water and panicked their fellow beach goers. For several decades following the attacks, New York papers continued to sound an annual alarm about the danger of sharks in the waters of the Atlantic coast.

Epilogue

It was the tale of the aberrant, perhaps sickly, juvenile great white that drove the legacy of the species. Peter Benchley based his novel "Jaws," on the events of 1916. By the twenty-first century, the image of the great white has been somewhat softened by its characterization as a mysterious and misunderstood creature. Benchley pleaded for the life of a great white that had killed a young swimmer in Australia. He declared that rogue great whites do not exist, despite how the animal was depicted in his novel.



Characters

The Great White Shark

The great white shark that was suspected of being responsible for the attacks on the Jersey shoreline during July 1916, was a juvenile shark estimated to be about eight years old. It was seven and one-half feet in length and weighed three hundred pounds. When it was killed, human bones and flesh were found in his stomach. The experts later theorized that the shark was greatly weakened by hunger and fatigue or was sickly and was unable to hunt in the open waters, forcing it closer to shore to find its prey. It may have had problems getting sufficient nourishment when it was competing with larger predators in the hunt for prey during its southern migration. Its relative weakness may have caused it to get caught up in a strong current of the Gulf Stream, forcing it northward and inland.

The modern scientific consensus about this particular great white shark is that it had displayed aberrant behavior during its rampage of the Jersey Shore. Unfortunately, it was the shark that Peter Benchley used as a model for his novel, "Jaws." The novel and later the movie terrified people so much that it permanently implanted the behavior of this particular great white in the minds of most people as typical behavior for all members of the species.

This great white terrorized the Atlantic coastline off New Jersey for several weeks in that hot July of 1916. From these incidents, the great white has been known ever since as the most feared of all marine animals.

Charles Vansant

The first victim of the shark attacks along the Jersey coastline in July 1916 was Charles Vansant. He was a young man who was soon to be married. Visiting Beach Haven with his physician father, mother and siblings, Charles ventured out into the Atlantic with his loyal retriever for a brisk swim. Not many other swimmers were around in the dark blue waters, but Charles was a good swimmer, confident of his abilities and unafraid.

The great white began to track two distinct figures in the water above him. His olfactory lobes were picking up scents that told him they were mammals. The vibrations and electromagnetic impulses from their movements in the water stimulated and engaged the shark. Perhaps the sun reflecting off the pale soles of Charles' feet and palms of his hands appeared to the shark to be glimmering, fast-moving fish. The erratic thrashing of the dog may have translated as an animal in distress, which would make for easy prey for the predator.

The dog, probably fatigued from the strenuous swim, departed for the shore. Charles soon followed, but by now the great white was in hot pursuit. The shark attacked from



behind and below, ripping into Charles' leg. Rescuers on shore saw what was transpiring and immediately set off to rescue him.

However, his wound were so severe that even his physician father and two other doctors on the scene were unable to stop the bleeding and Charles soon expired. His death was the first in the United States to be officially attributed to shark bite.

Lester Stilwell

Lester Stilwell is the young teen who was attacked and killed by the great white shark when it swam down the Matawan Creek in July 1916. His body, a large portion of which had been eaten, eventually surfaced in the creek.

Charles Bruder

Charles Bruder was the bell captain at the exclusive New Essex and Sussex Hotel at Spring Lake. Bruder decided to take a quick swim in the Atlantic. Unfortunately, the great white shark picked up his scent and vibrations and attacked. He lost both legs and died soon after being brought ashore.

Stanley Fisher

Stanley Fisher was a strong athletic young man who was the tailor in Matawan. He dived in the creek to try to recover the body of Lester Stilwell. Right after finding the boy's body, the shark attacked Fisher, who died on the operating table a few hours later.

Dr. Frederic Augustus Lucas

To help in the investigation, Dr. Frederic Augustus Lucas, director of the American Museum of Natural History, dispatched Dr. Nichols to the scene of the shark attack on Charles Bruder. Dr. Lucas held to his belief that the swimmers were not attacked by sharks until evidence continued to build that proved him very wrong.

Dr. John Treadwell Nichols

Dr. John Treadwell Nichols was called in to investigate the attack on Charles Bruder. Amazingly, Dr. Nichols, a marine animal expert, wrongly concluded that Bruder's death was caused by the attack of a killer whale.

Dr. Eugene Vansant

Dr. Eugene Vansant was a noted physician in Philadelphia. On July 1, 1916, he took his family for a vacation to Beach Haven on the Jersey coast. His eldest child, Charles



Vansant, was the first victim of the attacks by a stalking great white shark along the coastline.

Michael Schleisser

Famous big-game hunter and taxidermist Michael Schleisser went on a fishing expedition in Raritan Bay on July 14, 1916. The men caught the man-eating white shark in their trawling net and ultimately killed the animal. When Schleisser cut the shark open, he discovered human bones and flesh inside the shark's stomach.

Peter Benchley

Peter Benchley, author of "Jaws," based his novel in part on the attacks on the Jersey coast in 1916 by a great white shark. Benchley appeared at a hearing in Australia, pleading with the council not to hunt down and slaughter a great white that had killed a young swimmer. His depiction of the great white, he told them, was not representative of the true behavior of a great white—they were not man-eaters.



Objects/Places

Jersey Coast

In 1916, a juvenile great white shark stalked the coastline of New Jersey. After several attacks, the people and visitors of the beach communities became panicked over the man-eating sea monster that was terrorizing its shores.

Philadelphia

Dr. Eugene Vansant, a prestigious physician in Philadelphia, took his family for an outing on the Jersey Shore on July 1, 1916. Vansant's son, Charles, was the first victim of the great white shark. Dr. Vansant stood by helpless as his son bled to death from his wounds.

Beach Haven

The first shark attack of July 1916 occurred at Beach Haven on the Jersey Shore. Thousands of visitors had thronged to the beach trying to escape the oppressive heat of the summer.

New Essex and Sussex Hotel

The bell captain of the New Essex and Sussex Hotel, Charles Bruder, was the second fatality from the attacks by a great white shark along the Jersey Shore in July 1916. The Essex was a grand resort where many beach goers flocked to in the summer.

Spring Lake

The great white shark traveled from its first kill at Beach Haven to Spring Lake where it killed its second victim, Charles Bruder, the bell captain at the Essex Hotel. Bruder bled to death from the bites of the shark that took both his legs.

Matawan Creek

The great white moved from its second victim at Spring Lake to Matawan Creek. It is theorized that the shark was confused by the coastline and was unaware that it was moving from salt water to fresh water. The shark killed two people during its brief stay in Matawan Creek.



Raritan Bay

The great white shark that had killed four swimmers, mauled others and terrified the entire Jersey Shore, was finally captured and killed in Raritan Bay by a famous big-game hunter and taxidermist, Michael Schleisser.

Asbury Park

The resorts of Asbury Park were attempting to save its tourist business by installing wire nets close to the shore that would keep out the great white shark. Benjamin Everingham was given the job of patrolling the waters in his wooden rowboat and looking for fins cutting the surface of the water. He was skeptical that there was a real threat until the shark attacked his boat.

Florida's Atlantic Coast

Modern scientists theorize that the aberrant behavior of the great white shark that stalked the Jersey Shore in 1916 stemmed from his migration south to the Florida Coast. The juvenile shark may have been greatly weakened during his time in the southern Atlantic where he was no match for the larger predators that took most of the prey.

"Jaws"

Peter Benchley based his novel, "Jaws," in part on the great white shark attacks along the Jersey coastline in 1916. His novel confirmed in many people's mind the concept of the great white shark as a man-eater, which the author later regretted.

Themes

The View of Great White Sharks in 1916

Although knowing what we know about great whites in modern times, it is amazing to learn that as recent as 1916, the shark was not thought of as a dangerous animal. And it wasn't just the vast, uninformed public that had a grave misconception about these animals—it was the experts and experienced fishermen who claimed, at various times, that the shark was a timid, non-aggressive animal and that its jaw power was insufficient to bite through bones.

Dr. Frederic Augustus Lucas, director of the American Museum of Natural History, and his marine animal expert, Dr. John Nichols, both held fast to the theory that the attacks along the Jersey Shore were perpetrated by orcas, or killer whales. Experienced sailors and fishermen who presumably had first-hand observation of the sharks, stubbornly refused to believe that a great white shark had attacked and killed the swimmers. Many viewed the great whites as non-aggressive and "timid," incapable of attacking a man.

In the world of 1916, only a few drawings and a handful of blurry photos existed of sharks. The creature was a rather unknown entity to the "civilized" world of that time. It was therefore beyond the comprehension of most people that a creature that little was known about would be a threat to American shores. Attacks by "sea monsters" only occurred in uncivilized parts of the world. Perhaps it was a case of denial by a community unwilling to think its beaches were under such a threat. Even the newspapers of the time failed to give much attention to the attacks until there was so much evidence of a marauding shark that the press, and the people, could no longer deny it.

Reaction to Trauma

After the first attack along the Jersey coastline in 1916 that resulted in a death, there were various reactions to the incident. Some were in complete denial that the first victim of the shark was killed by a marine animal. Many experienced sailors were certain that he had drowned. Even though the official documentation filled out by the attending physician indicated that the death was the result of a shark bite, even experts such as the director of the American Museum of Natural History and his marine animal expert were certain that the responsible creature was a killer whale. Sailors and fishermen who had observed sharks close up in their travels were certain that a shark was too timid and not strong enough to kill a human. Were their opinions based on fact or were they in denial—was the prospect of a killer shark close to home just too terrifying and gruesome to consider?

Most of the tourists who were vacationing on the shore that summer had never seen a shark or even a photo or drawing of one. Sea monsters that hunted and killed human



beings were creatures of the uncivilized world. Sea monsters absolutely did not stalk the waters of the United States of America. It was unheard of. However, as more incidents involving the shark became known, some just sightings and brushes with the creature, but others much more serious—maulings and fatalities—the people and the state and federal governments began to panic. Beaches cleared and New Jersey's tourist trade and the economy of the state suffered.

Myths surrounded the attack of the shark. Some made the unreasonable connection that a recent sighting of a German U-Boat near the coast was somehow connected with the onset of the shark attacks. The US President declared a "war on sharks" and named one of his cabinet secretaries to head it. A US Coast Guard clipper was dispatched to patrol the North Atlantic coast. When the shark was marauding the Matawan Creek communities, the citizens took up arms against the beast. Hundreds of men and women would bring their guns to the creek and shoot at the slightest movement in the water. They also exploded dynamite willy-nilly in the creek in an attempt to eradicate the menace.

Yet there were many beach goers and citizens who took the reasonable approach of staying out of the water until the shark was captured and killed. For many decades after the killings, the New York Times and other newspapers would announce the anniversary of the killings, which would serve to recreate the fear and panic that existed during July 1916.

The Legend and Legacy of the Great White

The events of 1916 sparked a fear and terror of the great white that has endured to present time. Peter Benchley modeled the great white in his novel *Jaws* after the great white shark who stalked the Jersey Coastline in 1916 and killed four swimmers and injured and terrified others. Modern experts theorize that the 1916 juvenile great white was a sickly or very fatigued shark that was not fit for the open ocean and thus stayed close to shore. Forced inland by his deteriorating condition, the great white had only limited prey at his disposal, including humans who would not be the most palatable to the animal and would never be its first choice.

The concept that most people have today of the great white is based on the atypical and aberrant behavior of a sickly shark. Modern scientists have learned more about the great white and have attempted to soften the image of the animal that remains mysterious and somewhat misunderstood. Most agree that the great white is not typically a man-eater who seeks out humans for its prey.

Perhaps feeling at least partially responsible for the great white's distorted reputation, Peter Benchley appeared before an Australian council, pleading with them not to hunt down and slaughter a great white that had killed a young swimmer. He asked that the council try to understand that the shark depicted in his book *Jaws* was not the typical great white. He pleaded with them to recognize that the shark was just being a shark and was not a man-eater.

Style

Perspective

Close to Shore is written in the third person narrative. The Pulitzer Prize nominated author, Michael Capuzzo, based his book on interviews, newspaper accounts, diaries and letters of the time, scientific accounts, and many other resources. He also read scores of books on the subject of sharks in his research and preparation for writing Close to Shore. Although the book is a historical account of the great white shark attacks along the coast of New Jersey in 1916, the author recreated the life story of the juvenile shark who perpetrated the attacks. By doing so, the reader is able to have a better understanding of the shark and "see" the attacks from his point of view. By explaining that this great white was displaying aberrant behavior that was atypical of the species, Capuzzo provides a plausible reason for the rare attacks. Capuzzo, in essence, makes the case that it is not in the great white shark's DNA to be a man-eater.

In the Sources and Acknowledgments Section, author Capuzzo explains that the recreation of the shark's life based on knowledge he gained from experts. One of his chief sources for this element of the book was George Burgess, ichthyologist and shark expert of the Florida Museum of Natural History. Based on the information he received from Burgess, other experts and his own journey in recreating the path of the shark, Capuzzo was able to reconstruct a reasonable account of the juvenile shark's life from birth, through his attacks on human prey and to his capture and death.

Tone

Close to Shore contains an unusual mixture of styles. Although the book chronicles a true life event, there are many lyrical almost poetic elements in the telling of the story, creating a blend between fiction and non-fiction. For example, the very first sentences of the book are, "The smell of the sea pulled him east. The Atlantic spread before him like a pool of diamonds, liquefied" (p. 1). This first chapter, titled "Last Man in the Water," provides no names or location about this man who takes a swim in the ocean. Knowing the subject of the book, the reader read can conclude with some certainty that the man was destined to become one of the shark's victims. However, the identity of the man is not revealed until several chapters into the book.

Another unusual stylistic approach is that the story of the great white's life from its beginning until its end is woven throughout the true account of the shark attacks along the Jersey Shore in July 1916. In this non-fiction work, the author take the non-conventional step of creating a story within a real life account. The story of the shark's life was based on scientific reports and research and from the author's own imaginations.



The reader learns that the shark was born in the North Atlantic and that he migrated south during the winter months. The juvenile shark suffered in the south—his relative small size no match for the hungry, larger predators with whom he had to compete for prey. The fatigued and sickly shark drifted northward, caught in a strong Gulf Stream current, weak from his southern experience. The great white was swept inland and remained close to shore, sensing he could not be a worthy hunter in the open ocean. As the young shark begins attacking human swimmers, the reader is under water with him as he is stimulated by sights, sounds and scents that draw him to his prey.

By using this style, which is a blend of realism and conjecture, the author allows the reader to be a witness to the shark's journey and provides an explanation as to why this great white displayed such atypical behavior compared with other members of his species.

Structure

Close to Shore - The Terrifying Shark Attacks of 1916 by Michael Capuzzo is separated into twenty-two short and medium-sized chapters. An epilogue follows the last chapter of the book. A section titled "Sources and Acknowledgments" is located at the end of the book. The book is interspersed with illustrative drawings including a two-page drawing of a great white shark that describes the physical attributes of the animal. Many of the chapters include photographs of resort hotels where beach goers were staying during the time of the attacks, including an interior of the elegant New Sussex and Essex Hotel in Spring Lake where one of the attacks took place. There are also photos of beach goers of the day, illustrating the popular bathing suits of the time. Many headlines are included that first give only passing attention to the attacks but which escalate later to page one headlines that scream warnings of the stalking man-eater. There is a photo of the slaughtered great white that was thought to be responsible for most of the attacks.

The book is structured in a mainly chronological order, depicting the events of the great white shark attacks along the coastline of New Jersey that began on July 1, 1916. The account follows the travels of the marauding shark from Beach Haven and Spring Lake to the inland Matawan Creek and finally to Raritan Bay, where the man-eater was finally caught and captured.



Quotes

"The Victorian scientific lust to classify and catalog every living plant, animal, and human tribe had made no inroads on the fish's privacy. Indeed, extreme scarcity is one of its greatest survival gifts."

Let Us Do Justice to Sharks, p. 3

"The great white employs a classic predatory technique once practice by the saber-toothed tiger. The extinct tiger hunted the woolly mammoth by biting it once and standing back. Avoid needless confrontation and expend no more energy than necessary...the great white was waiting for Vansant to bleed to death."

The Nightmare of Centuries, p. 33

"Sharks, like most animals, simply react in predetermined ways that, from an evolutionary standpoint, are clearly effective—or else they wouldn't be here any longer! That's why white sharks don't hold grudges, and don't spare women and children."

Detection and Concealment, p. 41

"The ocean is a wilderness. We would never enter a forest wilderness without being aware of its dangers, its predators. Yet we think of the ocean as our giant backyard swimming pool."

The Distance Swimmers, p. 47

"He came back at me again...and shook me like a terrier shakes a rat. But he let go while I was calling, then suddenly...took of the other leg. He's a big fellow and awful hungry."

"He's a Big Fellow and Awful Hungry," p. 55

"Old-time fishermen insisted a shark attack was too far-fetched to believe, that swordfish, giant sea turtles, and big mackerel were more likely man-killers than a shark."

Out of the Water, p. 60

"Sharks were considered too timid to threaten a live human being."

Out of the Water, p. 60

"None of the fabled huge 'white pointers' of Australia had ever traveled as widely to kill as many human beings, nor had any 'ever shown the ferocity of the made shark of New Jersey in July 1916.'"

A Long-Range Cruising Rogue, p. 75



"When we consider that there are hundreds of thousands of bathers on our eastern coasts every year and that for as long as anyone can remember no one has been bitten until these two recent cases, I think it is a word in favor of the sharks,' Smith [director, US Bureau of Fisheries] said. 'Our domestic animals, horses, dogs, and other, have not anything like this record.'"

The Shark Scare, p. 82

"There are several possible explanations for lunar-related shark attacks. Sharks could be reacting to the effect of the moon on other ocean species. The reproduction of many types of fish coincides with the cycles of the moon. High tides also reduce beach space, drawing prey such as seals into the water and sharks nearer shore."

The Creek, p. 95

"The face was unmarked, but the rest of the boy was scarcely recognizable. The left side of the abdomen, the left shoulder, and the right breast had been eaten away. The left ankle had been chewed off. The flesh between the hip and the thigh had been mangled and the stomach had been ripped open as if by giant claws."

To See Its Body Drawn Up on the Shore, p. 114

"This was not a rogue shark, tantalized by the taste of human flesh and bound now to kill and kill again. Such creatures do not exist despite what you might have derived from 'Jaws.' Let us mourn the man and forgive the animal, for, in truth, it knew not what it did."

Peter Benchley. Epilogue, p. 137

Topics for Discussion

Why did many people in the coastal regions of New Jersey not believe that the attacks on several swimmers were sharks? How were sharks perceived by fishermen and others who had knowledge of the ocean and marine life? What sea animals did some think were responsible for the attacks of 1916?

Why was it unusual for a great white shark to be in a creek? Why is it impossible for sharks to live very long in fresh water? What does the shark's body sink when it is killed?

What are some reasons why sharks sometimes attack people? What animals do sharks mistake swimmers for? Do sharks find humans a tasty part of their diets?

What modern novel was based, in part, on the shark attacks on the New Jersey coastline of 1916? How did Peter Benchley's novel impact the legacy and legend of the great white shark? How is the nature of the great white shark viewed by experts in the twenty-first century?

Why was Charles Vansant vulnerable to shark attack when he swam off the coast of New Jersey in 1916? Why is a human more at risk when he swims in the ocean with a dog as his companion? Why do sharks sometimes attack boats?

Why do great whites sometimes bump their prey before attacking them? Why do some sharks attack their prey and then back off and wait before attacking again? What other animal behaved like the shark when hunting their prey?

What are some of the physical features of the great white? How many teeth does the great white have? Why are sharks not compromised if they lose teeth? What is the skin of great whites covered with and why can it cause damage to its prey?