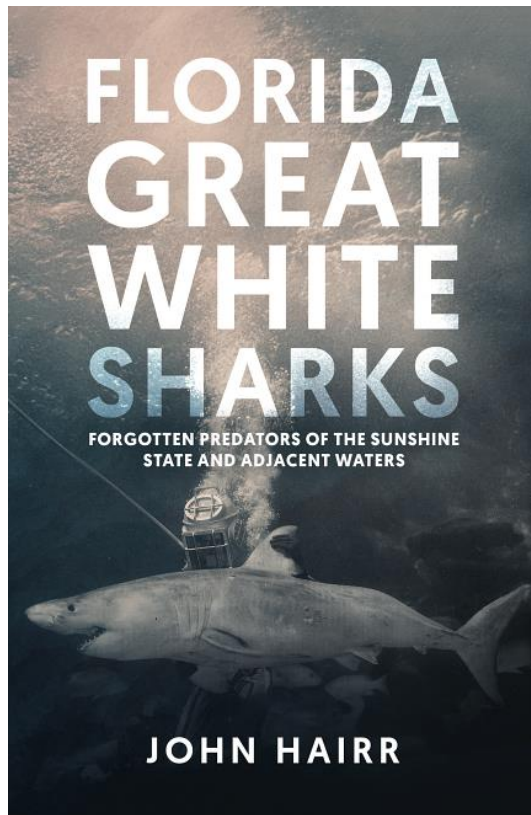




This groundbreaking work documents great white sharks found in Florida and adjacent waters.

**Florida Great White Sharks:
Forgotten Predators of the Sunshine State and Adjacent Waters
By John Hairr**

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FLORIDA GREAT WHITE SHARKS

FORGOTTEN PREDATORS OF THE SUNSHINE
STATE AND ADJACENT WATERS



JOHN HAIRR

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Introduction



Carrying such fearsome names as “Maneater” or “the Perfect Predator,” the great white shark, *Carcharodon carcharias*, is perhaps the most feared creature in the sea. When most people think of great whites in North America, their minds usually wander to places with cool waters such as California or South Africa. Great whites are often drawn to those shores because of the abundance of marine mammals such as sea lions and seals, which are a prime source of food for these sharks. Yet contrary to what many might believe, great white sharks are not restricted to these cooler regions of the planet. These sharks are highly migratory, and distributed in all of the world’s oceans. Some even range into warm tropical and subtropical seas such as the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean. They are found in virtually all of the coastal regions of the United States. Along the coast of Florida, from Amelia Island south through the Straits of Florida, up through Tampa Bay, west to Perdido Key and beyond, people have encountered great white sharks for many generations. This book is therefore an attempt to remind folks that researchers working at facilities across the Sunshine State were at the forefront of the efforts to learn about great white sharks, conducting much groundbreaking research on these apex predators throughout the twentieth century.

Great white sharks are just one of the many species of sharks swimming around in the ocean. Ichthyologists have identified over four hundred and fifty species of sharks inhabiting the world’s oceans, and the list continues to grow as new discoveries are made (Compagno, 1990).

So what exactly is a shark? A shark is a fish, and thus shares several characteristics with all fish such as possessing gills for breathing, living in water, and having a vertebral column. But not all fish are the same, and that is why scientists divide them into classes, orders, families, and so forth. Sharks, rays, and chimaeras are a class of fish known as Chondrichthyes, as their skeletons are made up of cartilage instead of bone. Chondrichthyes are divided into two subclasses-the Holocephali and the Elasmobranchii, the former being made up of fish such as the chimaera whose cranium and upper jaw are “fused” together (Compagno, et. al., 2005).

The Elasmobranchii are broken down into two suborders, which are the Batoidei and the Selachii. Stingrays, skates and mantas are batoids. All species of sharks are selachians, of which there are eight orders that include all of the shark species. These are Hexanchiformes, Squaliformes, Pristiophoriformes, Heterodontiformes, Squatiniformes, Orectolobiformes, Carchariniformes, and Lamniformes (Compagno, et. al., 2005).

We will concern ourselves with the seven families of sharks that make up the order Lamniformes. These sharks share such traits as having five gill openings, a long mouth extending past the eye, an anal fin and two dorsal fins. These sharks are aplacental livebearers, which means they hatch from an egg inside the mother’s uterus, and live there until they are born. Several species of these sharks are known to practice a form of cannibalism by feeding on the embryos of their weaker siblings before birth (Gilmore, 1991).

There are five species of sharks that make up the mackerel shark family Lamnidae, which includes the great white shark. Makos, both shortfin and longfin, the porbeagle shark, and the salmon shark are the other members of the mackerel sharks.

Great white sharks have two dorsal fins, long pectoral fins, a crescent shaped caudal fin (tail), paired pelvic fins and an anal fin. The second dorsal fin and the anal fin are smaller than the first dorsal fin. They have large, black eyes, a conical snout and five large gill slits. Their serrated teeth are triangular in shape, and razor sharp. They are colored various forms of gray to bronze on top and white underneath with a black blotch known as the axillar patch on the

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body near where the posterior edge of the pectoral fin joins the body (Compagno, et. al., 2005).

Great whites are not the largest species of fish in the sea. That distinction goes to the whale shark, which can attain lengths of nearly fifty feet long. Whale sharks are considered harmless to humans, as they are filter feeders who feed on krill. Although they are the planet's largest species of fish, they do not have the teeth and jaw structure necessary to consume large prey such as mammals. Unlike whale sharks, great whites are capable of consuming large prey and thus are the largest fish that hunt and consume large animals.

Great white sharks have been reported to reach some remarkable sizes, some of which have not been verified, leaving some ichthyologists to question the validity of these claims. For example, a specimen caught off the coast of South Africa was reported to have attained a length of thirty six and a half feet. Another large specimen, this one measuring 21 feet, was caught on the south side of the Straits of Florida back in 1945 by a commercial shark fisherman, Ollyandro del Valle, who was fishing off the northern coast of Cuba (Bigelow and Schroeder, 1948).

The largest great white ever studied along the east coast of the United States was examined and measured by shark researcher Russell J. Coles, who led an adventurous life hunting sharks along the Outer Banks of North Carolina in the early twentieth century. On June 28th, 1918, he came across a large great white that had been tangled in a net near Cape Lookout. Earlier, some other fishermen had reported seeing an enormous shark entangled in a fishing net just offshore, but when they said the shark was as big as their twenty-five foot fishing boat, Coles dismissed their story as a tall tale.

Upon closer investigation, he found the fishermen's description of the large shark remarkably accurate. Coles wrote (1919), "My carefully noted observations justify the following claim of dimensions for it, length, 22 ft.; head, larger than 50 gallon barrel; mouth, 3 ft. wide; circumference at arm-pit of pectoral, 18 ft.; length of pectoral, 6 ft.; width of pectoral, 3 1/2 ft.; dorsal, not seen; width at caudal notch, origin of tail, 20 in.; width of tail, 7 ft.; weight, over 2 tons."

In addition to being really big predators, great white sharks are also very fast swimmers. Though not as fast as other lamnids such as shortfin makos, great whites are capable of traveling at high rates of speed. They normally swim at about two miles per hour, but when in attack mode they can travel up to ten times as fast.

Just like other lamnids, great whites have some very special physical features that help them thrive in cool water. These sharks have a complex heat exchange system which allows them to retain much of their body heat, which in turn helps their muscles and vital organs work more efficiently. In cool water, they can move rapidly and efficiently on a moment's notice. They expend a lot of energy keeping warm, and need to eat lots of calories to fuel the whole process.

When attacking, a great white uses its speed and weight to build up the force necessary to carve out meat from its large victims. Food items for white sharks caught off the southeastern United States frequently include loggerhead turtles, large fish, birds, and marine mammals such as seals, whales, dolphins or porpoises. Sometimes, when practical, great whites swallow their prey whole.

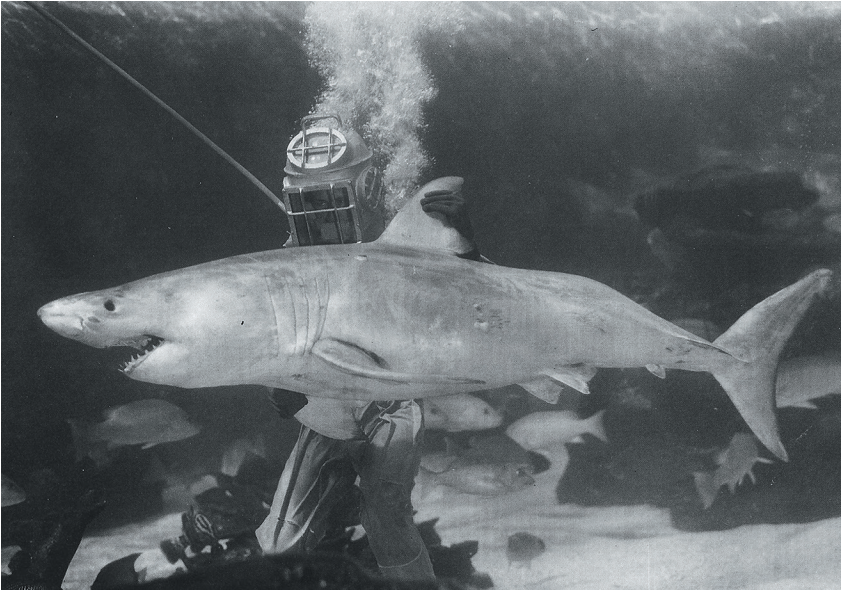
Great whites have been known to attack humans, but only rarely do they consume them. Researchers theorize that this may have to do with the rather paltry amount of body fat on the average human, and that they are not worth the expenditure of calories needed to overcome and digest such a strange tasting morsel. There are exceptions to this, and until the day when we are able to communicate complex thoughts directly with animals, these will continue to be just theories.

Along the coast of the southeastern United States, in both the Atlantic Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico, great whites tend to stay well offshore in the deeper waters, out near the edge of the continental shelf where water temperatures are cooler. But during the winter months when water temperatures drop, they are frequently seen close inshore. Certain combinations of weather, prey availability and tides can also produce conditions that bring the great whites in from the deep during the warmer months.

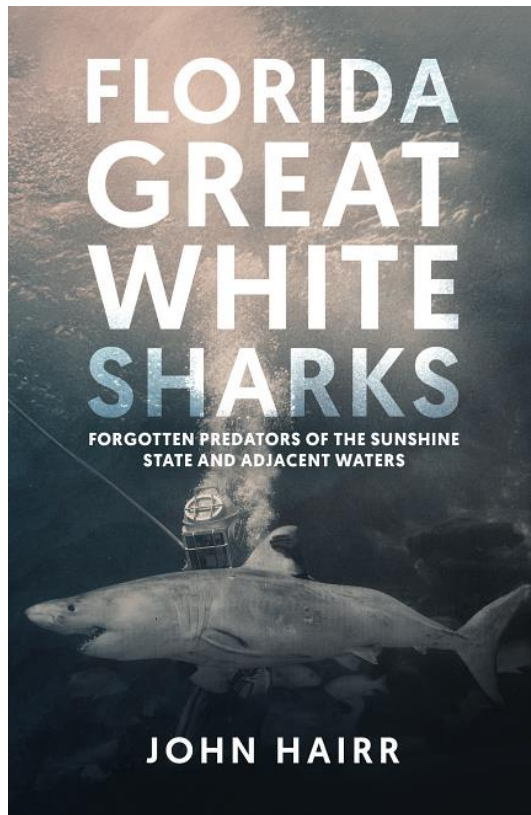
Since great whites generally prefer cooler waters, one would expect that they are rarely seen along the coast of the southeastern United

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States south of the Carolinas. However, that is not totally accurate, as people have been encountering them in our waters for generations. Here they often cause quite a stir when these sleek apex predators show up searching for a meal, especially the larger ones. Along the stretch of coast from Georgia to Mexico, they are most frequently seen in the vicinity of the Florida Keys. There, a combination of geographic features including the close proximity of the edge of the continental shelf in the deep waters of the narrow Straits of Florida combined with the availability of prey provide conditions relatively favorable for encountering great white sharks. But it is off northeastern Florida where the earliest studies of *Carcharodon carcharias* were made by naturalists back in the twentieth century. Unfortunately, much of this groundbreaking research is now all but forgotten.



Researchers at Marineland of Florida were on the cutting edge of shark husbandry, as evidenced by photos such as this one taken circa 1955 of a *Carcharodon carcharias* at the park. This shark survived approximately three weeks. Photo courtesy Marineland of Florida.



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