

ST. LAWRENCE SHARK OBSERVATORY (ORS)

Increased Presence of White Sharks in the Gulf of St. Lawrence:
Public Advisory for Divers and Other Marine Users



PRESS RELEASE

For Immediate Release

⚠ MEDIA CONTACT ⚠

No interviews will be granted regarding this release.

Increased Presence of White Sharks in the Gulf of St. Lawrence: Public Advisory for Divers and Other Marine Users

Editorial Note: This advisory is **not intended to sound the alarm**, but rather to raise public awareness of the presence of white sharks through a precautionary message grounded in scientific observation, rather than exaggeration, fear, or sensationalism. Acting solely out of concern for safety and public awareness, we are issuing this advisory in response to numerous media and public enquiries, and in the absence of any official communication on the rise in sightings and confirmed increase in this species' presence in the St. Lawrence. Any media coverage of this advisory—particularly headlines—should accurately reflect its preventive nature, **avoiding any wording likely to generate unwarranted fear or misunderstanding**. This advisory also serves as a science-based counterbalance to social media distortions, AI-generated hoaxes, influencer oversimplifications, and misinformation in general.

Gulf of St. Lawrence, August 11, 2025 — Over the past week, a reported close encounter between a diver and a white shark (*Carcharodon carcharias*) in the Magdalen Islands, along with sightings by divers—both underwater and from boats—of severely mutilated seals in Baie des Chaleurs and off the Gaspé Peninsula, have prompted the St. Lawrence Shark Observatory (ORS) to issue this voluntary and non-binding advisory for divers, swimmers, paddlers, and other marine users in the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

ORS has been studying St. Lawrence sharks for over 25 years, including four years of dedicated field research on the white shark in the Magdalen Islands. While concerning, these recent events are part of a broader trend observed throughout the Northwest Atlantic and come as no surprise. In fact, they reflect a wider shift in the distribution and abundance of white sharks over the past decade—as confirmed by recent scientific publications^{1, 2}—and

¹ Allegue, H., Bordeleau, X., Winton, M. V., Skomal, G. B., Joyce, W., Barajas, V. L., Trudel, M., & Bowlby, H. D. (2025). Systematic assessment of the increasing presence of white sharks in Atlantic Canadian waters. *Marine Ecology Progress Series*, 761, 145–161. <https://doi.org/10.3354/meps14855>

² Bastien, G., Barkley, A., Chappus, J., Heath, V., Popov, S., Smith, R., Tran, T., Currier, S., Fernandez, D. C., Okpara, P., Owen, V., Franks, B., Hueter, R., Madi19gan, D. J., Fischer, C., McBride, B., & Hussey, N. E. (2020). Inconspicuous, recovering, or northward shift: Status and management of the white shark (*Carcharodon carcharias*) in Atlantic Canada. *Canadian Journal of Fisheries and Aquatic Sciences*, 77(10), 1666–1677. <https://doi.org/10.1139/cjfas-2020-0055>

ST. LAWRENCE SHARK OBSERVATORY (ORS)

Increased Presence of White Sharks in the Gulf of St. Lawrence:
Public Advisory for Divers and Other Marine Users

align with the history of the Indigenous peoples of the Maritime Peninsula, which attests to the presence of the white shark in these waters long before European contact³.

Although the statistical risk of a shark-related incident in Canada, including in the St. Lawrence, **remains low**, the likelihood of such encounters is increasing as white sharks repopulate the St. Lawrence and human activity intensifies in their key habitats during peak season.

White Shark Behaviour and Risk Factors

Contrary to mindless killing machine portrayed in films such as *Jaws*, the white shark is a highly evolved hunter equipped with sophisticated sensory systems, specially attuned to identifying its natural prey. The more recent, well-intentioned trend of portraying the white shark as indifferent to humans, and therefore harmless, is equally misleading and oversimplifies the true complexity of its behaviour. In reality, the truth lies somewhere between these two extremes and depends on many variables.

Furthermore, a recent publication⁴ also confirms that the white shark does not blindly attack everything it encounters, and that the mistaken identity theory alone cannot account for all bite incidents. The level of risk posed by a white shark in any given situation therefore depends on a range of environmental and behavioural factors, including underwater visibility, the density of natural prey (such as seals), the presence of conspecifics or competitors, or whether the shark is a juvenile learning to hunt marine mammals. Most incidents likely result from an exceptional combination of such circumstances, where the victim unknowingly ends up in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Timing and Locations of Concern

Until 2021, no unprovoked interaction between a diver and a white shark had ever been substantiated in Canada. Since then, nearly ten encounters have been reported in Nova Scotia, and the one reported on August 2 in the Magdalen Islands would be the first such interaction in the waters of Quebec and the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Compounding the risk in the Gulf, is that that certain dive sites—particularly in Québec—are home to some of the largest concentrations of seals in Atlantic Canada. Among these, although less frequently visited, the uninhabited trio of Brion Island, Corps-Mort (Deadman's) Island, and Rocher aux Oiseaux (Bird Rock)—where the encounter reportedly took place—now present a significant risk.

Jeffrey Gallant, founder and scientific director of the ORS, and a diver for 43 years, emphasises the importance of situational awareness and adapting diving practices:

“Personally, I would avoid diving in places notoriously rich in seals, such as Rocher aux Oiseaux (Bird Rock), Corps-Mort (Deadman's) Island, and Brion Island, during the seasonal migration of white sharks in the Gulf, from June to November. These sites

³ Gallant, J. (2023, 19 octobre). Registre canadien des attaques de requins (2023:1). Observatoire des requins du Saint-Laurent. <https://geerg.ca/fr/attaques-requins>

⁴ Ryan, L. A., Slip, D. J., Chapuis, L., Collin, S. P., Gennari, E., Hemmi, J. M., How, M. J., Huveneers, C., Peddemors, V. M., Tosetto, L., & Hart, N. S. (2021). A shark's eye view: testing the 'mistaken identity theory' behind shark bites on humans. *Journal of the Royal Society, Interface*, 18(183), 20210533. <https://doi.org/10.1098/rsif.2021.0533>

ST. LAWRENCE SHARK OBSERVATORY (ORS)

Increased Presence of White Sharks in the Gulf of St. Lawrence:
Public Advisory for Divers and Other Marine Users

have clearly become zones of active predation, comparable to the Farallon Islands off San Francisco, where no diver with any sense of self-preservation would set fin. In such a context, constant mental vigilance and underlying fear would make any dive unenjoyable for most people. As for other Magdalens sites, as elsewhere in the Gulf, in the absence of large gatherings of seals, I would not hesitate to dive—always with a buddy—but I would nonetheless remain vigilant, which is essential during any dive.”

As a former dive instructor, Gallant adds:

“It is critical to remember that diver safety depends not only on wildlife behaviour, but also on the diver’s own state of mind. The sudden and unexpected appearance of a shark can trigger panic, especially among less experienced divers. Even if no confrontation occurs, a frightened diver may ascend too quickly, risking serious medical emergencies such as an air embolism or other decompression accidents. Mental preparedness and environmental awareness should therefore be considered just as essential as equipment checks and buddy protocols.”

Fortunately, these remote islands of the archipelago, located in the centre of the Gulf, remain beyond the reach of most divers, save for a few adventurers. However, if the white shark population continues to grow, it will only be a matter of time before one is encountered at a popular dive site elsewhere in the Gulf. As such, we believe that proactive adaptation and the dissemination of basic knowledge on shark presence and behaviour, is key to continue diving under safe and enjoyable conditions. Avoiding large gatherings of seals—especially when they remain pressed close to shore (which may indicate the presence of a predator)—avoiding murky water, diving with local operators who are familiar with the conditions, and staying informed about sighting reports can help reduce risks considerably. Likewise, swimmers and paddlers should remain alert to the presence of seals and avoid areas where they are concentrated.

Awareness and Public Safety

The St. Lawrence Shark Observatory (ORS) is neither a public agency nor a government body, and it is therefore not within our official mandate to issue advisories or ensure public safety. However, in the absence of official communication from government agencies regarding the increase in sightings of white sharks and reports of mauled seals in the St. Lawrence, aquatic recreation enthusiasts and the media naturally turn to us for information and reassurance.

Given the sensitive nature of this subject—which can influence public perception, inadvertently spark fear, or affect the decisions of users and coastal communities—we have deemed it necessary to publish this advisory, which ORS issues only with the utmost caution: this is only our second public advisory in over twenty years, the first, in 2005, addressing recreational diving and the Greenland shark (*Somniosus microcephalus*) in the Baie-Comeau area.

This new advisory, which applies not only to divers and swimmers but to all marine users, is based on field observations and ongoing research conducted by ORS, as well as scientific studies on the white shark—both in Canada and abroad—in similar contexts. In parallel with ongoing efforts across Atlantic Canada, ORS and its partners are initiating the development of a regional campaign focused on shark awareness, conservation, and public safety. In the

ST. LAWRENCE SHARK OBSERVATORY (ORS)

Increased Presence of White Sharks in the Gulf of St. Lawrence:
Public Advisory for Divers and Other Marine Users

medium term, this initiative would notably include the installation of informational and warning signs in strategic public and coastal areas, as well as collaboration with various stakeholders to establish a science-based, regionally coordinated awareness and monitoring program. Recognising that this issue concerns all Atlantic Canada, we also aim to contribute to broader initiatives alongside Canadian researchers, fishers, First Nations communities, and public authorities to promote sustainable coexistence between humans and sharks.

Legal Protection and Responsible Conduct

While the renewed presence of the white shark is already prompting some divers and marine users to exercise caution in certain areas, it may also encourage thrill-seekers to pursue this formidable predator, driven by curiosity, the quest for dramatic images, or media attention. It is therefore important to remember that the white shark is a protected species under Canada's *Species at Risk Act* (SARA)⁵. As such, it is strictly prohibited to harass a white shark, including by intentionally approaching it at the surface—which could disrupt a predation event or cause injury—flying a drone over it, luring it with bait, or attempting to cage dive without a permit from Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO).

We also advise boaters—particularly those in light or inflatable craft—to maintain a minimum distance of 10 metres from any surface activity involving a white shark, especially when it is feeding on a seal or another carcass, as was the case in Gaspé on July 31. A white shark engaged in predation can display energetic and unpredictable behaviour and, in rare cases, may strike a vessel or accidentally bite a pontoon or motor out of curiosity or mistake. This could lead to serious consequences, such as loss of balance or a deflated boat.

Conclusion

It may be reassuring for some to bury their heads in the sand when faced with a situation that, just five years ago, seemed unthinkable. Yet the ocean is undergoing profound change, and we must approach this new reality with calm, realism, and optimism. The marked return of the white shark is a rare sign of hope for the health of the St. Lawrence, even though it poses certain challenges for human activities. By adapting to this evolving situation, understanding the risks, and accepting a few reasonable compromises, we can continue to enjoy the sea while integrating this renewed presence into our activities and cultures—just as Indigenous peoples have done for millennia⁶. In doing so, Canada joins the wider community of “shark nations,” such as Australia and South Africa, where the presence of these powerful predators brings occasional conflict, but also a deeper connection to the living ocean and the wild rhythms that still govern it.

For more information, additional context, or to consult recommendations for divers, swimmers, and other marine users, please visit the ORS Canadian Shark Attack Registry:
<https://geerg.ca/shark-attacks>

⁵ https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2022/eccc/CW69-14-507-2021-eng.pdf

⁶ Betts, M. W., Blair, S. E., & Black, D. W. (2012). Perspectivism, Mortuary Symbolism, and Human-Shark Relationships on the Maritime Peninsula. *American Antiquity*, 77(4), 621–645. <https://doi.org/10.7183/0002-7316.77.4.621>

ST. LAWRENCE SHARK OBSERVATORY (ORS)

Increased Presence of White Sharks in the Gulf of St. Lawrence:
Public Advisory for Divers and Other Marine Users

No Interviews on This Topic

Officially founded in 2003 (under the name GEERG), the St. Lawrence Shark Observatory (ORS) is a registered charity led by a small group of volunteer scientists and experts from complementary fields, all passionate about sharks and deeply committed to their professional and family lives. As previously mentioned, ORS is neither a public agency nor a government body. Consequently, we are under no obligation to publish such advisories, and we do not seek media attention or funding in connection with communications we consider to be in the public interest.

Our commitment to the sharks of the St. Lawrence is nothing new. Active in their study since the 1990s—at a time when these maligned predators swam unnoticed in a sea of indifference—we worked alone for many years, until the unexpected return of the white shark in the Gulf sparked a frenzy of interest from all directions in this iconic species, both scientifically and in the media. Practically every shark sighting now triggers a surge of enquiries, and we simply do not have the resources to manage the resulting deluge of media requests, which typically flood in over several days and at all hours.

Due to the risk of the story spiraling out of control and causing further prejudice through misinterpretation, and the persistent misconceptions that too often distort our words or the facts reported—a phenomenon unfortunately common in shark coverage, here as elsewhere—we will not be giving any interviews regarding this advisory. We instead invite the media to refer to it **verbatim and without extrapolation**, as it reflects our current understanding of the presence of the white shark in the St. Lawrence in relation to human safety. Any speculation beyond these facts risks leading to the kind of erroneous, sensationalist, or trivialising interpretations that are all too common and serve neither the public nor shark conservation.

The St. Lawrence Shark Observatory (ORS) will continue to share factual updates as its research progresses in the months and years ahead. However, for any questions regarding the increased presence of the white shark and, in particular, public safety risks, you may contact either Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO)—responsible for the management and monitoring of marine wildlife—or the public safety authority with jurisdiction over the area concerned.

Thank you for your understanding and for helping us ensure that public safety and shark conservation remain grounded in fact and respect.

Best regards,



Jeffrey Gallant, M.Sc.
Founder and Scientific Director
St. Lawrence Shark Observatory (ORS)
<https://geerg.ca>

ST. LAWRENCE SHARK OBSERVATORY (ORS)

Increased Presence of White Sharks in the Gulf of St. Lawrence:
Public Advisory for Divers and Other Marine Users

ABOUT:

The **St. Lawrence Shark Observatory (ORS)**, Canada's first non-governmental organisation and registered charity dedicated to sharks, was officially founded under the name Greenland Shark and Elasmobranch Education and Research Group (GEERG) in 2003, following five years of groundbreaking exploration in the North Atlantic Ocean, the Saguenay Fjord, and the St. Lawrence Estuary. These expeditions led to the first cage dives with pelagic sharks in Canada in 2000 and, in 2003, the first natural encounters with the Greenland shark, launching a decade of research and novel scientific publications on this elusive and little-known species. Today, the St. Lawrence Shark Observatory's volunteer-based research and conservation activities no longer focus exclusively on the Greenland shark, but also on all shark species inhabiting the Gulf and Estuary of the St. Lawrence, the Saguenay Fjord, Atlantic Canada, and the Arctic Ocean.

— 30 —