

SHARKS — HAZARD MITIGATION

723. Dr D.J. HONEY to the Minister for Fisheries:

I refer to the recent comments by Mr Ben Foo-Collyer, who lost his mother to a shark attack. He said that we have management policies for everything else, but not this and that it is easy for the government and Premier Mark McGowan to say sorry and have sympathy, but they have really done nothing. What is the minister's plan to protect Western Australians swimming close to shore from shark attacks this summer, especially given that the SMART drum lines trial has ended?

Mr D.T. PUNCH replied:

I thank the member for the question.

I would also like to again express in this house our sadness at the tragic loss of Mr Paul Millachip, and certainly all members in this place extend their sympathy to his family and to all the first responders who responded on the day and subsequently, and particularly to the young boys who worked so hard to clear the beach and try to do what they could. I think they acted very heroically, and we can be very proud of them.

I stood in this place on a number of occasions and talked about the government's plan to help reduce the risk of a shark attack. We know that we cannot fully stop a shark attack; that is never going to happen, but we can do our best to reduce the risk, and we have reduced that risk by a number of things that are in place. The first is that we have a comprehensive tagging and research program to tag white sharks and link the reception of those tags to the SharkSmart app to provide real-time analysis of where the sharks might be. The SharkSmart app is supported by a number of people who report sharks when they see them, so we have public sightings. They also report the incidents that we know are likely to trigger and attract sharks, such as whale carcasses that decay on beaches, and alert people to that information. The first step is providing information and encouraging people to use the SharkSmart app. It is important when entering the water to be aware of what is happening. That is the first one—providing information.

The second is that we have a number of steps to improve safety outcomes for people, including the personal shark deterrent devices that have been in place for some time with a subsidy and beach enclosures. A number of local governments have taken the option for beach enclosures to reinforce an area and make sure that sharks cannot actually reach it. We have also put in place beach emergency numbers. That measure is designed to make sure that the response is as speedy as possible should somebody be attacked, because we know that if someone is attacked, urgent medical assistance and first aid, particularly to stop bleeding, can be very significant for the victim's survival. Getting that response in place quickly is a critical part of the plan.

Another part of the plan is having a response unit that is well rehearsed in terms of practising scenarios. In this unfortunate situation, St John Ambulance was advised at around 10.05 am on Saturday and within 30 minutes there were vessels in the area and people on site. The beaches were closed and people got out of the water. I thank all those people who responded quickly by getting out of the water. That is not always the case. That response unit meant that we were able to activate the response measures and make sure that people were safe immediately.

In the member's own electorate, we recently installed, at the request of the local government, two shark alarm units. They will be automated in the near future. At the moment, they are manually operated to give a warning when a shark receiver detects a shark within an area. There is a series of shark-alert towers along the coast between here and Esperance as part of the entire network that involves tagging sharks and having a receiver network to then predict where the sharks will be and activate warnings appropriately. The member knows that Western Australia has a very, very large coastline. We work hard to address popular swimming beaches. That is reflected in the shark aerial patrols that the state has put in place in partnership with Surf Life Saving Western Australia, which patrol the coast from Mandurah to the northern beaches. We also have a south west helicopter patrol service that services the southern beaches in the south west. For special events, we partner with Surf Life Saving WA to make sure additional resources are put in place to safeguard the public.

The plan and response is very comprehensive, recognising that we cannot eliminate the total risk of shark attacks, but we will continue to do everything we can to make sure that the public is informed and that the response is adequate, responsive and does its very best to make sure that people are safe in the water.