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2101

13th July, 2004

Mr Steve Taylor,
Executive Producer,
The 7.30 Report
ABC TV
GPO Box 9994
Sydney NSW 2001

Dear Sir,

I refer you to a segment broadcast on the ABC 7.30 Report program on 6/7/2004 entitled "Shark Numbers Dwindle", the transcript of which is located at:

<http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2004/s1148116.htm>

Some of the data presented and statements made on your show by the dive charter operator and the National Conservation Council representative are at odds with data presented at a recent stakeholders forum into the research conducted by NSW Fisheries scientists and others into the grey nurse shark (GNS) along the NSW coastline.

This forum was held at the Fisheries complex at Cronulla on Saturday, 29 May, 2004. Attendees included representatives from some of the recreational fishing groups, Freedivers and Oceanwatch. Attendees also included a representative from the National Conservation Council and one from the dive charter industry.

Just some of the facts presented on your show that are either at odds, misrepresented or used very selectively compared with those presented by Fisheries scientists at the Forum include:

- The grey nurse shark population being about 300. The figure of 292 sharks is in fact the maximum number of sharks observed in a survey in the winter of 2000 and does not at all indicate the number of sharks in the grey nurse population. Fisheries have estimated the number of sharks using the Petersen mark/recapture technique, and the number is between 416 and 466 sharks, with an upper limit 95

Confidence Level between 541 and 766. Some estimates by the Freedivers Association put the number of GNS at about 3000.

- Recreational fishing being largely/primarily responsible for cutting the numbers (of grey nurse sharks). It was stated at the forum that incidental mortality was the result of a number of factors, including commercial fishing (set lines, trawling, hand-lining), recreational fishing, shark nets, finning and mooring ropes around tails. It was also stated that since the imposition of the first restrictions on GNS, no grey nurse shark deaths can be attributed to recreational fishing!
- Two thirds of the grey nurse population were actually hooked, and 90 percent of those hooks were from recreational fishing. The figure given by Fisheries scientists of hooked sharks in 2001 was that 12% had hooks and this is a far cry from the 66% stated on your program. It was also stated at the forum that there were 7 times more hooks having nylon trace than wire trace, again very different than the claims made on your program.
- The commentator on the 7.30 Report stated that "Its estimated that as few as 300 grey nurse remain in pockets up and down the eastern seaboard". The information presented at the forum was that the sharks migrate in about May/June, spend between 1-6 weeks at what is known as aggregation sites, and then site hop. They do not live in pockets along the coast. In fact, the population in the southern part of the State is predominantly females, and they migrate northwards in about June.
- The statements made by the dive charter operator, that "you've just dedicated a species to extinction" and again with "I know this is tough, but the reality this is the end of a species" are both incorrect. For a species to become extinct means that species will no longer exist, but there are other grey nurse shark populations around the world that are quite healthy, such as in Western Australia, South Africa and the United States. What is of concern to scientists from NSW Fisheries is the population of the grey nurse shark along the east coast of Australia. It is that population that is considered under threat, not the species.

As a matter of interest, other groups question the results of the data from the Fisheries scientists. The Spearfishing and Freedivers Association of NSW contest Fisheries estimate of the grey nurse population, stating that the number is likely to be of the order of 3000. They also consider the population is not in a state of decline, but has been increasing for the last 10 years.

If there is in fact a decline in population, then there is something going on with the reproductive aspect to the population that has nothing to do with incidental mortality. In one published paper NSW Fisheries scientist Nick Otway has stated that "the number of observed pups (ie 6-14) was less than expected (ie 34-42) based on the numbers of reproductively mature females". It could be that the grey nurse population is on a self-destruct course where a "reproductive failure is insufficient to sustain the population, let alone enable it to recover". It could be that this "reproductive failure" is due to the

interaction of the dive charter industry, as so many divers interacting with the grey nurse in their aggregation sites must surely affect their behaviour. What else could explain the disappearance of the grey nurse in the critical habitat site known as Magic Point at Sydney's Maroubra?

If the Nature Conservation Council and the Dive Charter Industry are so concerned about the survival of the east coast grey nurse population, then they should be pushing for a total exclusion zone in these critical habitat sites where there is to be no interaction with grey nurses by any group, except for scientific study. This is the approach taken on land with the Wollomi Pine, so why not with the grey nurse shark?

In the interests of a balanced and accurate program and hence accurately informed viewers, it is incumbent on the ABC and the 7.30 Report program to correct the main factual errors presented and so redress an obvious (and hopefully unintended) bias.

Yours Sincerely

Phillip Ingram
President
Anglers Action Group (Sydney Northside) Inc