The big question: What should we do about shark attacks?

On average, three people are killed in shark attacks in Australia every year. However, the number of attacks is closer to 25-30. Of these attacks, two-thirds result in injury and about one-third leaves the person involved uninjured.

Each summer, reports on sharks and shark attacks are reported in the media. The summer of 2016-17 saw an increase in shark sightings near populated swimming and surfing beaches, although the two fatalities occurred in Western Australia in the middle of the year.

Various life-saving organisations have trialled different ways of ensuring the safety of swimmers and surfers, from monitoring shark activities with helicopters and a warning system, through to installing nets to separate swimmers and sharks to the more controversial step of shark culling, to reduce the shark population.

Family and community groups tend to favour shark nets as they increase peoples’ sense of security and are more likely to mean people visit beaches and swim in them.

However, environmental groups point out the harm that shark nets can cause to local marine life and furthermore argue that the number of fatal shark attacks each year is minimal. In favour of a non-interventionist approach, these groups point to statistics that outline the specific risks involved, and argue that people should change their behaviour when they enter a shark’s territory.

Quick facts:
- Australia has the second-highest number of shark attacks each year, following the US, which has a population over 10 times that of Australia
- Shark attacks are on the rise in Australia
- Shark nets often catch other protected marine species such as turtles or dolphins
- Great white sharks are a protected marine species
- Some eco-nets have been reported as falling apart and then becoming pollution in the marine environment
- There has only ever been one fatal attack at a beach protected by a shark net
Arguments that...we should do something about sharks

- There has only ever been one shark attack fatality at a beach with a shark net. They work.
- Beach-going is an important part of the Australian culture and nets will help preserve this.
- Although nets might trap other marine life, it is worth it if human life can be preserved.
- Anecdotally, shark attacks are much more frequent than official reports state.
- The number of large sharks in Australian waters has increased, putting swimmers and surfers at risk.

Snap perspectives

Shark nets should be installed

The Mayor of Ballina Shire Council, David Wright, said the beaches have been brimming with tourists since the nets went in one month ago. “Last season we sometimes had three or four people in the water, at the moment we’ve got hundreds.”

BALLINA Shire councillor Phil Meehan would like two more shark nets deployed in his local government area. “We must demand all actions be taken to prevent any harm coming to our children and young people from shark attack.”

Ex-NSW premier Mike Baird ordered more nets to be installed along the NSW coast line.

Craig Ison, a shark attack survivor said, “I’m a supporter of barriers for people who are swimming, like nippers and stuff like that”

The president of the Le-Ba Boardriders Club, Don Munro, has led the campaign to have nets installed. “We’ve been pushing hard for proven protective measures.”

There should be no shark nets

Green’s MP Justin Fields, “We know there are better measures that are also safer for the ocean, and we’d like to see those prioritised.”

“My advice is if you’re really, really worried about getting eaten by a shark, then that’s your choice. Pick up another recreational activity,” Australian Marine Conservation Society campaigner Fiona McCuaig.

Shark nets are killing marine life already inside the nets and should be removed by the State Government during whale and fish migration times, the Australian Institute of Marine Rescues reports.

Cathy Gilmore, who organised a protest against shark-net installation said, “It’s about giving people a false sense of security because they think nets will provide safety and there’s no safety whatsoever.”

Arguments that... humans should change their behaviour

- The ocean is the natural environment of sharks - humans should modify their behaviour, rather than that of sharks
- Swimming and surfing are inherently risky sports: people can drown or sustain other injuries, shark attacks are just one risk among many
- The damage to marine life and therefore the marine environment is just too large
- Nets only protect very small areas of beach, not enough to make a real difference
- Installing nets is expensive and time consuming