It's time to address the big white fish in the room. Yet again we've seen a shark attack off the Ballina coast, this time just a few days after the “eco barrier” shark-nets were abandoned. Despite anything with the “eco” prefix being as ecologically friendly as the Moroccan carpet seller is actually “my friend”, the upshot is that an integral part of Mike Baird's $16 million shark defence strategy has been reduced to near-shore flotsam, and then another young surfer was chomped. Thankfully, he’s expected to fully recover.

The most recent attack isn’t related to the barrier’s failure, but it is completely related to the NSW and Australian governments’ failure to properly invest in shark-attack prevention strategies and research. This latest attack has reinvigorated calls for shark-fatal measures along NSW beaches, despite there being no conclusive studies that claim that shark culls and shark nets will effectively protect beachgoers.

Conversely, plenty of experts seem to believe the contrary. When the West Australian governments' knees jerked up and they implemented their most-recent controversial cull, 100 scientists wrote an open letter of condemnation, claiming the measures to be ineffective and over-the-top. One problem with culls is that while they haven’t proven to be effective, they may also be damaging as they will ineffectually utilise resources that could have been used more productively, while providing the ocean-using public with a false sense of security. Culls could quite
conceivably make the ocean a more
dangerous place, lulling us into
complacency while appealing to our less
desirable impulses for revenge and fear.

What we need right now is calculated
decision making from those in power.
What we’re seeing instead is increased
pressure on politicians from the
proponents of shark culls, who are piggy
backing off the affected communities’
indignation. To make matters worse,
more sensationalist news outlets are
fuelling outrage by appealing an already
scared public’s worst impulses. In a
thinly-veiled attempt to raise hysteria and
sell more newspapers, some news
services have relied on sensationalist
language when describing what is in
effect a scientific problem, opting to
describe sharks as “man-eating
monsters”, and wounds as “horrific”.
Australia’s most famous surfer, Tony
Abbott, has gone one step further than
shark nets and culls, coming out on
Melbourne's 3AW radio in favour of a
North Coast commercial shark fishery,
saying that in “a choice between people
and animals, [he’s] on the side of the
people every time” – especially if the
people can turn a nice little profit off it.

The issue is an emotive one, especially
for surfers in the affected areas, as well
as for the family and friends of those of
us eking out our surfing lives under the
spectre of being fish food. Policy,
however, should be made without
emotion; policy should be made with the
best possible outcome in mind, not the
appeasement of the more rabid
elements of the electorate.

And the only way that governments can
form effective policy is if they have a
better understanding of the problem, and
for that to happen there desperately
needs to be more money invested in
research. Just this year the federal
government pledged $150 million dollars
to providing armed security for the
already armed police, adding to the $2.2
billion already allocated to counter-
terrorism measures, all in response to an
international phenomena that has
claimed three lives on Australian soil.

In contrast, since the December 2014
Lindt Café siege there have been five
fatal shark attacks across Australia, with
another 11 non-fatal encounters
occurring between Newcastle and the
Queensland border alone. If it is indeed
people and the preservation of human
life that are the concern of the politicians,
then surely the money allocated for
shark research and preventative
measures should be more than a mere
10% of that allocated to protect those
who we’ve entrusted to protect us,
against a threat that has claimed less
lives. The spectre of international
terrorism is real, but Down Under it’s far
more reasonable to be afraid of what
lurks beneath, rather stalks above.

For mine, the only acceptable solution is
one that actually prevents shark attacks
from happening, not a knee jerk band-
aid response to the undercurrent of fear
that is currently running through our
community. If the research indicates that
culls actually do protect beachgoers,
then so be it, kill the bastards, but that
currently isn’t the case. At the moment
politicians at the state level are playing
politics with surfers’ lives, while the
scandal-starved Sydney rags are
recklessly inflaming the whole situation.
It’s time for our elected leaders to treat
this is a problem that can be solved –
and invest the resources to do so,
because until we get an understanding
of these animals, none of us are going to
feel comfortable in the water, and
indeed, more young surfers will be
bitten.