

ACTIVITY: Fishing for basking sharks

CASE: [GSAF 1899.08.23.R](#)

DATE: Reported August 23, 1899

LOCATION: Monterey Bay, California, USA.

NAMES: Unknown

NARRATIVE: The men were hunting basking sharks. One shark they harpooned “raised itself partly out of the water and began to strike with its powerful tail. The first blow crushed the starboard boat, beating in the rail and killing two men and swamping her. The shark then struck [illegible] the other side, crushing the port boat like an eggshell. Then it rolled over, beating the water into foam, and with a terrific lunge disappeared, carrying the boat under water. The wreck soon came up, with one man clinging to it, five having been killed or drowned by the shark. The survivor drifted around for hours and was finally picked up. This was the first and last attempt to take the big sharks of Monterey.”

SPECIES: The incident involved a basking shark, said to be 40 feet in length.

NOTE: This was a provoked incident; the shark had been harpooned.

SOURCE: Mexia Evening Ledger (Mexia, Texas), Wednesday, August 23, 1899



Disastrous Attempt of Jap Fishermen.

"You know how imitative the Japanese are," said a naturalist of Monterey, Cal. "Well, the Chinese for years have maintained a shark fishery here. They catch small sharks, principally the leopard and oil sharks, and make a fair good living out of it. The livers they use for oil, the skins they sell for shagreen and sword handles, and the fins are employed in making some delicacy dear to the Chinese palate.

"Some time ago a Japanese appeared here, a little black-eyed fellow who in a very short time mastered all the intricacies of the Chinese method of taking sharks. What he was particularly interested in was a big bone shark that was supposed to be found off Monterey in summer. He was referred to me as a possible authority, and it so happened that I could give the information desired. Monterey Bay is peculiar in this respect, that, apparently, it is the home of one of the largest sharks, an almost toothless giant that attains a length of forty to fifty feet and a weight of forty or more tons. Occasionally these large sharks roam into the bay, feeding upon small fish; but in summer, for some reason unknown, they go offshore about ten miles and lie at the surface in schools. At such times they are very sluggish and can be approached with little or no difficulty, and for this reason are known as basking sharks, as they appear to bask on the surface.

"All this I told the Japanese, all the time wondering what he was about, and finally he unfolded his scheme, which was to make a business of capturing these monster sharks. If the Chinese made money catching small ones how much more could be realized from the large ones? he reasoned. The liver of one, he estimated would be worth a large amount of

money. I suggested that the fishing might be dangerous, but he merely laughed at that, and to make my story short he appeared in Monterey some weeks later with a party of his people. I believe they brought their boats around from San Francisco, but in any event it was not long before they were ready for business.

"It took them a week to locate the big sharks, about five or six miles off Monterey Bay. There was a school of large dimensions, the fish all lying awash, or on the surface, with their big dorsal fins out of water and their heads in one direction. The sharks were of enormous size, and this and the extraordinary nature of the school would have demoralized almost any one, but not the Japanese. They stood off a while, then three boats pulled in, each with a harpooner in the bow. The sharks appeared to be sleeping, lying head on to the sea and presenting a remarkable spectacle. Nearer the boats approached until finally they were fairly in the school, and not a shark had stirred. Then when directly over the big game the little men sent the harpoons into them. The sharks all dashed off, and in a few moments the entire school was in full flight, rushing along at racehorse speed. The rope was soon exhausted, and the boats were jerked along, bow under in a manner that bade fair to demoralize the fishermen. One boat was taken out to sea several miles; two others were carried up the coast, and the men began to think that they would have to cut away the line, but finally after the fish had towed them up and down the coast and subjected them to many dangers, their speed began to decrease, and the fishermen could lay on to the rope and haul themselves up on the fish.

"It was now the lancer's turn to do his work. The sharks appeared to be completely exhausted, and one of the

heavy boats was carefully rowed alongside one of them. As her bow went over the giant the lancer thrust his keen blade into the vitals of the fish. A terrible struggle was expected, but the shark merely moved ahead convulsively, and the fishermen had every reason to think that it was dead or dying; but they had much to learn about sharks. The monster did not move, but lay on the surface perfectly quiet, and two boats soon made fast, one on each side, tricing the huge fish up with large ropes, so that it floated between them and about five feet from each boat; this accomplished, sail was set and the boats moved slowly away before the wind.

"They had gone perhaps a mile, and the fishermen probably were congratulating themselves on the capture when, without warning, the fish, which was estimated to be forty feet in length and to weigh many tons, raised itself partly out water and began to strike with its powerful tail. The first blow crushed the starboard boat, beating in the rail and killing two men and swamping her. The shark then struck the other side, crushing the port boat like an eggshell. Then it rolled over, beating the water into foam, and with a terrific lunge disappeared, carrying the boat under water. The wreck soon came up, with one man clinging to it, five having been killed or drowned by the shark. The survivor drifted around for hours and was finally picked up. This was the first and last attempt to take the big sharks of Monterey."