



Mike Coots harbors “no animosity toward sharks” after losing his leg to one. He and other shark attack survivors have joined forces to save the species.

FROM VICTIMS TO PROTECTORS

SHARK ATTACK SURVIVORS JOIN THE FIGHT TO SAVE THE OCEAN’S TOP PREDATOR

WHEN KRISHNA THOMPSON got a call from Debbie Salamone asking him to help sharks, he didn’t hesitate to say yes. It didn’t matter that he had lost his left leg several years earlier to a bull shark while celebrating his 10th wedding anniversary in the Bahamas.

He and his wife had been out dancing the night before. Thompson let her sleep while he went for a morning dip. As he treaded water, looking toward the horizon, he saw a dark shape gliding toward him. Before he knew it, the shark had clamped onto his left leg between the knee and ankle. “I remember feeling its teeth crunch into my bone,” he says, “and then it lifted me out of the water ... and started carrying me to deeper water.”

The shark pulled Thompson underwater, but he miraculously pried open its jaws. “I started swinging,” he remembers. “I went ballistic, hitting its mouth and eyes.” Then the shark swam away.

Somehow, Thompson swam to shore and hopped onto the beach before collapsing. “I didn’t want to close my eyes because I didn’t think I would wake up,” he says. “Then I was out.”

He woke the next day in a Miami hospital, his chest black and blue from the CPR he had received after flatlining multiple times in the Bahamas. His left leg had been amputated.

In 2009, he got the call from Salamone, a shark advocate with the Pew Charitable Trusts. Salamone shared some startling

news: 100 million sharks are killed each year mainly for their fins, an ingredient in shark fin soup. “I couldn’t believe it,” says Thompson, who now shares his story as a motivational speaker. “That’s what sold me.” Despite his ordeal, he agreed to support Salamone’s efforts to help sharks.

Having lived through a similar incident, Salamone knew exactly what to say to Thompson and to the more than a dozen other people she successfully recruited to join her advocacy group, Shark Attack Survivors for Shark Conservation. In 2004, she herself had survived a blacktip shark attack that resulted in a severed Achilles tendon.

Despite the attack, she couldn’t turn a blind eye once she learned through her

work that the species was in trouble. The truth, she says, is that sharks have more to fear from humans than humans have to fear from sharks: “You are more likely to get struck by lightning than attacked by a shark.”

Though attacks have increased in some places like Hawaii, it’s not because sharks are becoming more aggressive—it’s simply that more people are heading into shark habitat in those areas to surf and swim. Globally, shark attacks are declining, according to the International Shark Attack File.

Among other efforts, Salamone’s group has pushed to close a loophole in the U.S. shark finning ban and supported statewide efforts to prohibit finning (see sidebar). The survivors make compelling advocates, says Salamone. “If a group like us can see the value in saving sharks, everyone should.”

In this edited interview with HSUS staff writer Ruthanne Johnson, Salamone, Thompson and Mike Coots—who lost his right leg to a tiger shark while bodyboarding off the coast of Kauai, Hawaii—share their reasons for fighting to save the very animals who nearly killed them.

What inspired you to become an advocate for sharks?

COOTS: I got a phone call from Debbie and she explained what she does and about how sharks are in trouble and need help. She suggested I watch the documentary *Sharkwater*. I was blown away by the statistics and what was happening. The film talked about how important sharks are for our oceans. It felt like the right thing to do.

THOMPSON: That was easy. I helped because I couldn’t believe people could do this to animals. And also for humans and for my family and kids and generations to come. The oceans will survive without humans. But humans can’t survive without the oceans. So getting involved just made sense.

You didn’t feel fear or animosity toward sharks after the attack?

COOTS: I have no animosity toward sharks or regrets from that day. I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. That’s just what sharks do. They don’t have hands to test if

it’s something to eat or not. They just have their teeth. We’re in their environment.

What challenges do sharks face?

SALAMONE: They’re a slow-growing species and late to mature. They have few young. They simply can’t keep up with the fishing pressure. That’s the most significant, and it can be challenging to get people to understand the vulnerability of the ocean’s ultimate predator. But every animal plays a crucial role in the ecosystem, and sharks, as the top predator, keep the food web balanced. We need an abundance of sharks for a healthy ocean.

What has been your most compelling experience advocating for sharks?

THOMPSON: Getting that bill signed by President Obama and closing the loophole and helping the environment is one thing. I was able to make a difference and that’s history.

What have you learned about yourself through this journey?

SALAMONE: I’ve never been a big risk taker, and the shark attack brought me to face all the things that made me uncomfortable. Progress often comes in small steps, you just have to keep pushing. I know that now, that persistence and determination make things happen. And I discovered that things in life can change and be better even when it seems at first that they’re not.

COOTS: I learned that when doors open up, go ahead and do it. I have a real rose-colored view of politics because I’ve seen it work firsthand. I know a lot of times it doesn’t, but it can work and it does. If you have the right science and the right people behind you in politics, the system works.

THOMPSON: That I can make a difference. The key is that I really didn’t lose anything. Being an amputee and having been through so much—and now I am out there talking to people and on TV—people want to hear what I have to say. My story has inspired others, even if they still have all their limbs but maybe they’re depressed or something. For me to have come through such an experience and be OK, that’s an inspiring story.



From left: Mike Coots, Al Brenneka, Debbie Salamone and Krishna Thompson

TAKING A BITE OUT OF THE SHARK FIN TRADE

IN 2010, MIKE COOTS talked with Hawaii legislators in support of a state bill to ban the shark fin trade. With his help and the efforts of organizations including The HSUS, the law passed. Oregon, Washington and other states followed suit.

Several members of Shark Attack Survivors for Shark Conservation traveled to Washington, D.C., in 2011 to meet with federal legislators in support of the Shark Conservation Act, which closed a loophole in the 2000 ban on shark finning in U.S. waters. The group has also presented to the United Nations and the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species.

In 2012, the group teamed up with the State University of New York at Stony Brook for a study that analyzed shark fin soup samples from more than 50 restaurants in 14 U.S. cities. DNA testing showed that most of the samples came from threatened shark species. In 2013, two states targeted in the Stony Brook study—New York and Illinois—passed laws banning the shark fin trade.

Ten states and two U.S. territories have shark fin bans, and several states are considering similar bills.

THIS SPREAD, FROM LEFT: MIKE COOTS; PEW CHARITABLE TRUSTS