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# The *Jaws* Effect: How movie narratives are used to influence policy responses to shark bites in Western Australia

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This article examines the way political actors use film narratives to influence policymaking following shark bites. To analyse these relationships I propose the concept of the *Jaws* Effect, where film-based historical analogies are used as a political device to frame real-life events in ways that make the events governable and prejudice certain policy options. Three elements of the *Jaws* Effect are reviewed including the intentionality of the shark, perception that these events are fatal and the belief that ‘the shark’ must be killed. These elements are applied to a case study of policy responses to shark bite episodes in Western Australia in 2000, 2003, 2011 and 2014. The reasons why this political device may not always work are also suggested.

**Keywords:** emotion; film; *Jaws* Effect; public policy; shark bite; Western Australia

## Introduction

This article examines the impact of fictional film narratives on the policy process following shark bites. Previous literature has looked at the influence of actors and celebrities on policy (Marsh et al. 2010; t’Hart and Tindall 2009) as well as the way movie themes and imagery influence policy discourse. Gamson and Modigliani (1989: 21) examined the impact of the 1979 film *The China Syndrome* on the development of nuclear power in the US, noting ‘its most important achievement was to provide a concrete, vivid image of how a disastrous nuclear accident could happen’. In addition, both Schulte (2008) and Hollinger and Lanza-Kaduce (1988) examined the role the film *WarGames* in the development of computer crime legislation in the US. Schulte notes:

*WarGames* engaged a ‘teenaged technology’ discourse, which cast both internet technology itself and its users as rebellious teenagers in need of parental control. This discourse enabled policymakers to equate government regulation of the

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internet with parental guidance rather than with suppression of democracy and innovation. (2008: 1)

In this case, I examine the leading role of the 1975 film *Jaws* on the political construction of certain themes and discourses in shark bite policymaking in Western Australia (WA). Following shark bites, there are often pressures placed on governments to act (Neff 2012; Neff and Yang 2013). These highly emotional issues present unique and complex public policy questions. There are circumstances when one event may result in little or no response, yet the same event occurring (or appearing to occur) a second or third time results in a dramatic escalation of policy responses. Often, these situations move from ‘normal’ conditions to ‘crisis’ events on the basis of their frequency or severity (Rocheftort and Cobb 1994). Even then, the factors that influence policy responses are not assured. Nohrstedt (2008: 258) identifies a lingering gap in the literature when he notes that there is an insufficient framework for determining, ‘why some crises result in major policy changes while others do not’. I argue that familiar film narratives can serve as the basis for political discourse when they appear to mirror well-known stories, blame marginalised target populations and provide quick political ‘solutions’.

In Australia, the questions around policy responses to shark bites are particularly important because three states maintain shark control programs. These include the use of shark nets in New South Wales since 1937, the deployment of nets and drum lines in Queensland beginning in 1962, and the recent \$22 million investment in shark mitigation strategies in WA. Drum lines are a fishing method that involves connecting a large baited hook to a buoy approximately one kilometre off a beach (WA 2014: 6). Moreover, of the 63 reported shark bite fatalities around the world between 2004 and 2013, 15 (24 per cent) took place in Australia. Shark bites are one of the most globally dispersed human–wildlife conflicts. Since 1580, there have been a reported 2569 shark bite incidents off six of the seven continents (ISAF 2013). The US, Australia and South Africa lead the world in total incidents (Neff 2012). Public policies to ‘control’ sharks near beaches can affect shark conservation by killing protected shark species.

The public is aware of shark bites and their interest has led to a cottage industry of entertainment and media to reinforce attention to these events. In motion pictures and on television, the portrayal of sharks is big business. For instance, a leading film website lists *Jaws* (1975) as the seventh highest grossing film of all time (adjusted for inflation), at more than \$1 billion (Box Office Mojo 2014). Meanwhile, the Discovery Channel’s *Shark Week* has generated ‘hundreds of millions of dollars in ad revenue’ (Tapper 2013). In fact, no other animal, on land or in the water, generates the entertainment income that shark species do. From the book and motion picture *Jaws*, which manufactured a public panic, to the more than 25 television seasons of *Shark Week*, which keep the fears and fascination alive, the human–shark relationship presents a well-known story predicated on a primal battle for survival between human and shark.

This article is divided into four sections. First, I highlight the way frequent dreaded events are given meaning in political discourse through historical analogies. Second, I propose consideration of the *Jaws* Effect (Neff and Hueter 2013), where fictional narratives of shark behaviour from film are used as historical analogies to frame real-life situations. The *Jaws* Effect functions as a blame-casting device that informs causal stories. Third, I review how these fictional narratives are used as

anchoring points following real-life events through a case study of WA. I demonstrate how the *Jaws* Effect can be seen as a political instrument in policymaking that reinforces three themes: that sharks are intentionally hunting people, that shark bites are fatal events and that killing individual sharks will solve the problem. Here, the ‘rogue’ shark theory (Coppleson 1958) from the book and movie *Jaws* (Benchley 1974) is used to legitimise several repeated policy responses. Last, I review why the *Jaws* Effect may not be successful in every policy environment. In all, this analysis demonstrates the way governments may rely on fictional narratives to develop public policy in emotional situations as a means of advancing political interests. Elaborating on the role of movie myths as political device helps show how political actors negotiate these sensitive periods to influence political processes and to contest evidence-based science.

### Frequent dreaded events and historical analogies

Clusters of highly emotional events are often the focus of policy responses across a number of issue domains. Multiple house fires, school shootings, ‘king hits’, highway deaths, construction worker accidents, hurricanes, shark bites or truck crashes within a certain area or timeframe may become policy issues. A key way that these issues rise or fall on the agenda is how frequently they occur, or appear to occur, and whether they are framed as random events or alarming problem conditions (Neff 2013). I suggest that the real or perceived frequency of certain affect-laden events and their dreaded outcomes are prioritised with lower thresholds for their occurrence in order to facilitate political control. Rochefort and Cobb (1994: 20) note that the frequency of perceived problems can help shape problem definitions. The ‘frequency and prevalence of a hazardous or unjust situation are a potent trigger to it being considered a social problem’ (Rochefort and Cobb 1994). Similarly, Kingdon (1995) highlights the importance of frequency ‘indicators’ that report increases of problems in society.

The use of problem definitions and causal stories are central to defining the terms of the political debate (Stone 1997), because the politics of causal stories determines when blaming someone is appropriate. A certain frequency of certain fearful issues or events can create expectations for action and induce the opening of policy windows *if* they are perceived as intentional. Stone (1989) notes that two frames dominate the blame-making process: accidents and intentional actions. Political power resides in these two categories of circumstance, because events either are perceived as accidents that are blameless and ungovernable, or intentional and requiring justice (Stone 1989). Each domain is subject to dispute and can be advocated for by political actors to avoid blame and accountability or to assign intent, which helps make events governable and blameable. Therefore, governments may use familiar historical analogies to ascribe intent to certain events as a way to lower the threshold for policy action and advance solutions, especially in the face of an increased frequency from ungovernable dreaded events.

t’Hart defines historical analogies as ‘instances when a person or group draws upon parts of their personal and/or collective memories, and/or parts of “history” to deal with current situations and problems’ (2010: 106). Brändström, Bynander and t’Hart have used historical analogies to review policy by looking at ‘the role of “history” in contemporary governance’ (2004: 191). Nohrstedt has also noted the important role of analogies in decision-making, stating: ‘analogies, routines and

other heuristics as a means of reaching solutions to complex problems should not be omitted' (2008: 273). Missing from policy analysis literature, however, is a review of the way frequent events can be explained using movie mythology. I address this gap by examining the way fictional film narratives are used to explain the frequency of shark bites by attributing blame to an individual shark in the governance of shark-bite policymaking. The selection of certain analogies is a key political tool because they allocate culpability to certain targets and prejudice policy responses based on feelings towards that species (Schneider and Ingram 1993). Importantly, the identification of human feelings and blame towards animal species is distinct from giving the species themselves human attributes. Stone (1989: 283) notes that 'in the social world, we understand events to be the result of *will* [*sic*], usually human but perhaps animal'. In addition, Czech, Krausman and Borkhataria (1998) use Schneider and Ingram's (1993) social construction model to analyse how political power and laws are allocated to organisations that work in favour of certain animals.

### The *Jaws* Effect

The *Jaws* Effect is the way in which political actors use fictional representations in film (Neff and Hueter 2013) as the basis for explaining real-life events. This analysis relies on an understanding of the way historical analogies influence the public and can be used as a narrative that defines the debate and allocates blame. t'Hart (2010: 107) notes that there are four elements that contribute to their effectiveness: the real or perceived recency of events; the degree to which political actors have 'personal experiences of the events'; whether the event in question has produced widespread psychological impact; and whether the analogy serves the purposes of the actor.

The film *Jaws* fits this description in each of the four elements. The emotional nature and vivid images enables people to create a mental shortcut (Tversky and Kahneman 1973), where the frequency and recency of fictional stimuli in movies make them seem like real-life events. Cantor notes the realness of the film experience:

If we experience intense fear while watching *Jaws*, our implicit fear reactions became conditioned to the image of the sharks, to the notion of swimming, to the musical score – most likely a combination of the stimuli in the movie. Later, one of these stimuli – or even thoughts of these stimuli – trigger these unconscious reactions, even after our conscious minds have gotten past the problem. (2004: 301)

The socio-psychological saturation of the film as both a summer blockbuster and societal meme is widespread. As a result, politicians can connect words and images from this fictional narrative to real-life events making one analogous to the other and bringing along with it the same emotional triggers to symbols and words. This effect preferences understandings of certain situations and the way to respond to them.

Importantly, many modern representations of sharks mirror elements from *Jaws* and cue this analogy in ways that suggest humans are on the menu. Three Hollywood storylines from *Jaws* underpin the lasting strength of the *Jaws* Effect: the attribution of intentionality to the shark; the perception that human–shark interactions lead to fatal outcomes; and the belief that the shark must be killed to end the threat.

## *Jaws*

Media portrayals of sharks in movies have a crucial impact on public perceptions of shark behaviour. To be clear, negative perceptions of sharks pre-date films. According to Arnold (2005), the concept of the ‘shark-monster’ dates back to Olmec iconography (1500 BCE–400 BCE). At issue in this analysis is the way in which fictional conceptions have implications for public perceptions and policy responses. This analysis focuses on the central role of *Jaws* in 1975. In his review of the film *Jaws*, movie critic Roger Ebert (1975) states that the story:

involves a series of attacks on swimmers by a great white shark, the response of the threatened resort island to its loss of tourist business, and, finally, the epic attempt by three men to track the shark and kill it.

The elements of *Jaws* that made it so effective included haunting music, an advertising effort designed to prime public fears (Gottlieb 1975: 93–94), and a powerful causal story (Stone 1989) of a serial killer shark. The first piece of this fictional narrative was the motives of the shark.

### *The attribution of intentionality to the shark*

*Jaws* framed its story with a giant white shark wilfully hunting humans. The features of the intentionality and territoriality of one shark, which has developed a taste for humans, are noted in the film script (Benchley and Gottlieb 1975):

Chief Brody: Now this shark that, that swims alone ...  
 Hooper: A rogue.  
 Chief Brody: Rogue, yeah, now this guy, he – he keeps swimming around in a place where the feeding is good until the food supply is gone, right?  
 Hooper: It’s called Territoriality. That’s the theory ... A theory I happen to agree with.

The concept of a ‘rogue’ shark has its roots in Australia. Australian surgeon and shark-bite researcher Victor Coppleson suggested the behaviour of rogue sharks in the 1950s. The theory maintained that human–shark encounters occurring in the same area annually are ‘the work of a single shark – a rogue shark – which maintains even for years a beat along a limited stretch of shore’ (Coppleson 1958: 45). The rogue shark theory finds a vivid vehicle in *Jaws*. In this portrayal of the shark as an intentional enemy, the outcome is severe and requires intervention.

### *The perception that human–shark interactions lead to fatal outcomes*

A cluster of fatal shark bites occur in the film *Jaws* over a short period and reinforce the narrative that a shark bite is a fatal event. In the film, a girl is killed in the opening sequence, followed by a boy playing on a raft in the water at a beach, followed by a fisherman, a person rowing a boat and finally the shark hunter Quint. In each case, the murderous and fatal nature of the events creates an essentialist element to the nature of human–shark interactions. Even in a boat, a shark bite may be fatal. Moreover, after the release of *Jaws*, the use of sharks in the media to portray life and death situations became more common.

*The belief that the shark must be killed to end the threat*

In *Jaws*, the only solution is to kill the shark. It is explained that a rogue shark will continue to hunt for prey (humans) in an area unless the food supply stops or it is killed. Peschak notes that *Jaws* was a ‘seminal turning point in the way the public perceived sharks’ (2006: 160). Indeed:

[a]lmost overnight the white shark went from being considered – at most – an obscure ocean dweller that few had ever heard of to a man-eating monster with a lust for wanton killing, and a creature that was best eradicated from our planet forever. (Peschak 2006: 160)

This entertainment narrative overwhelmed and displaced alternative scientific narratives about shark behaviour that discount the theory. The fiction from *Jaws* perpetuated stereotypes about sharks as villains that made false historical analogies politically valuable. A case study review of WA responses following shark bites examines the use of the *Jaws* Effect on the policy process.

**Case study: WA**

The selection of shark bites as an issue, and WA as the case, helps inform broader policy questions. First, the discourse and responses to shark bites illustrate a lingering question of why events can trigger different responses or no response at all. Shark bites are also telling because they can represent salient and emotional moments that place pressures on governments to act (Neff 2012; Neff and Yang 2013). This approach is consistent with Lodge and Hood’s (2002) research on dog-bite policy-making, Achen and Bartels (2004) analysis of electoral voting and natural disasters and the broader literature on risk (Sunstein and Zeckhauser 2011), as well as crisis management (McConnell and Stark 2002).

WA presents a unique case study for two reasons. First, it has experienced more fatal shark bites, in a smaller amount of time, than have ever been reported in Australian history. Table 1 compiles a list of recorded fatal shark bites in Australia since 2000, based on media reports, such as *Australian Geographic* (AG staff 2014). The table also includes the location and presumed species involved. WA has experienced 13 fatalities, with eight occurring since 2010 (see Table 1). As a result, policy responses and public feedback to these events have made it a contemporary political issue. In particular, two episodes (2000 and 2011), when three fatal shark bites occurred in close succession and close proximity (including two in South Australia (SA)), are noted as the triggers for the WA policy responses. Secondly, WA presents a unique case given the number of policy responses that have been initiated, including scientific research, aerial patrols, a trial of baited drum lines and an ‘imminent threat’ policy (WA 2014). This last policy stands out in particular because measures to catch and kill individual sharks have been a key feature of WA responses since 2000. The state’s investment of \$22 million in shark-bite mitigation efforts (WA 2014) offers an important opportunity for policy analysis. As a result, public statements and policy documents are the main evidence in this research, given its focus on comparing film narratives and policy discourse.

I suggest that politicians used movie myths to support their policies in order to use intent-based narratives that are well known and blame sharks in order to lower

**Table 1.** Fatal shark bites in Australia 2000–14

Date	Location	Presumed species
2000: 24 Sep	Cactus Beach (SA)	Great White
2000: 25 Sep	Black Point (SA)	Great White
2000: 06 Nov	Cottlesloe (WA)	Great White
2002: 30 Apr	Smoky Bay (SA)	Great White
2002: 16 Dec	Miami Lake (QLD)	Bull shark
2003: 08 Feb	Burleigh Lake (QLD)	Bull shark
2004: 10 Jul	Gracetown (WA)	Great White
2004: 11 Dec	Opal Reef (QLD)	Bull shark
2004: 16 Dec	Adelaide (SA)	Great White
2005: 19 Mar	Abolhos Islands (WA)	Great White
2005: 24 Aug	Glenelg Beach (SA)	Great White
2006: 07 Jan	North Stradbroke Isle (QLD)	Bull shark
2008: 08 Apr	Ballina (NSW)	Bull shark
2008: 27 Dec	Port Kennedy (WA)	Great White
2010: 17 Aug	Gracetown (WA)	Great White
2011: 17 Feb	Coffin Bay (SA)	Tiger Shark
2011: 04 Sep	Bunker Bay (WA)	Great White
2011: 10 Oct	Cottlesloe (WA)	Great White
2011: 22 Oct	Rottneest Island (WA)	Great White
2012: 31 Mar	Port Geographer Marina (WA)	Great White
2012: 14 Jul	Wedge Island (WA)	Great White
2013: 23 Nov	Gracetown (WA)	Great White
2013: 29 Nov	Campbell's Beach (NSW)	Tiger shark
2014: 08 Feb	Yorke Peninsula (SA)	Great White
2014: 30 Apr	Thatra (NSW)	Great White
2014: 09 Sep	Byron Bay (NSW)	Great White

Source: AG (2014).

thresholds for policy action and favour quick policy solutions. This construction of sharks matches and relies on its connection to fictional narratives from *Jaws*. At issue in these cases is the way that sharks are constructed as a certain type of familiar problem (including intentionality and fatal outcomes) that necessitates a certain type of familiar solution (shark hunts and culling). I suggest that this can be seen in four shark-bite episodes in WA, in 2000, 2003, 2011 and 2014.

### *Policy considerations in 2000*

During the Australian spring and summer of 2000, three fatal shark-bite incidents occurred within three months. The first two occurred in SA, where two surfers were killed within two days of each other. One swimmer was killed in WA two months later. On 24 September, Cameron Bayes was bitten by a white shark and died while surfing on his honeymoon in SA. On 25 September, 17-year-old surfer Jevan Wright died following a white shark bite at Blackfellows Point near the town of Elliston (Coroner's Inquest 2001). There were calls from the public to hunt and kill the white shark(s) involved following these incidents and a widespread belief that they were the work of one rogue shark. The SA government maintained that federal laws protecting white sharks should be obeyed, but others disagreed. For example, SA shark hunter Andre Georgescu stated 'If not there is every indication they will kill again' (Hasan 2000) and former shark hunter Vic Hislop

called for ending laws protecting sharks, suggesting that these protections would inevitably lead to more bites (Macfarlane 2000).

Two months later, on 6 November, a white shark bit two swimmers as they returned from an early morning swim in waist-deep water. The bites occurred at Cottesloe beach, the most popular in WA (Tourism Australia 2014). One of the swimmers, Ken Crew, died on the beach from blood loss in view of beachgoers. These events created national concern, community fear and intense media scrutiny. People drew parallels to *Jaws* almost immediately. One of Crew's rescuers was reported as stating, 'It was like the movie *Jaws*' (cited in Smith 2000). *The Australian* newspaper reported the same witness as saying, 'it was *Jaws* in real action, and I don't say that lightly. This was the most savage, powerful, killing lunge I've ever seen, not that I've seen a lot of sharks' (cited in *Australian* 2000). Another witness noted, 'I always thought the film *Jaws* was exaggerated, but not after what I saw today' (cited in Dowdney 2002). Elliot (2000) reported for *The Independent* stated, 'A bit like Amityville [*sic*] in *Jaws*, the beach was immediately closed.' Poultney (2000) reported for the *Herald-Sun* after the incident noting, 'Not since 1975, when the blockbuster *Jaws* was released, have the monsters of the deep been so feared.' Indeed, the film is noted here as actively influencing the mindset of those dealing with this tragedy.

After the incident at Cottesloe beach, there were immediate calls for hunting and killing the shark. WA Fisheries Minister Monty House issued a special order after the event to have the shark found and killed, stating, '[t]he community's safety is paramount. I know everyone won't agree with the decision, but it's a decision we've made' (cited in Martin and Brook 2000). WA Premier Richard Court stated that the shark must be killed, saying 'If that shark is going to endanger public safety; if it [the same shark] comes back near the beaches, in this case I believe we have a responsibility to put public safety first' (cited in Keenan 2000). However, public reaction to the weeklong, ultimately unsuccessful, hunt for the shark was not unanimous in support of killing the shark. Newspaper reports from *The Australian* wrote that 'the death of Mr Crew and the shark hunt has sparked almost unprecedented reaction on local talkback radio, with two-thirds of callers against destroying the white pointer' (Keenan 2000). The CSIRO (Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation) shark biologist John Stevens noted that humans are not normal prey items for sharks, saying, 'if they did, I can assure you we would be having rather more attacks than we do' (cited in Brook 2000). These messages, however, did not resonate with policymakers and attention remained on the entrenched rogue shark frame.

There was so much attention drawn to these incidents in WA and the idea that one shark was responsible, that *Jaws* author Peter Benchley commented on the stories and public concern. He wrote an open letter to Australians in *The Guardian* newspaper:

While I cannot pretend to comprehend the grief felt by Ken Crew's friends and family, and would not conceive of diminishing the horror of the attack, I plead with the people of Australia – who live with, understand and, in general, respect sharks more than any other nation on earth – to refrain from slaughtering this magnificent ocean predator in the hope of achieving some catharsis, some fleeting satisfaction, from wreaking vengeance on one of nature's most exquisite creations. (Benchley 2000: G22)

Benchley (2000) added, ‘This was not a rogue shark, tantalised by the taste of human flesh and bound now to kill and kill again. Such creatures do not exist, despite what you might have derived from *Jaws*.’

Yet the ‘special order’ issued in WA became a formal policy and was adopted into the Shark Response Plan, detailed in the Shark Hazard Report Western Australia of 2001: ‘The Response Plan provides that in the event of a shark attacking, or attempting to attack, a person, fisheries officers would, upon verification of the identity of the animal, immediately attempt to kill the shark’ (EA 2002). This policy was an exemption from current protections extended to vulnerable sharks, such as grey nurse and white sharks, and therefore only applied to its state waters (three nautical miles from shore). The order comes from the Minister for Fisheries ‘which authorises Western Australian Police and Department of Fisheries officers, in the event of an attack, or attempted attack, to immediately kill the shark responsible for the attack’ (EA 2002).

### *Policy considerations in 2003*

In a second illustration of the *Jaws* Effect, these themes emerged again in WA in 2003. In this episode, the issue of what to do about sharks was raised following a shark encounter that resulted in no injury. It referenced the fatal shark bite on Ken Crew and addressed sharks as a menace to the WA community. Then Opposition Leader, Colin Barnett, suggested that the white shark in the 2000 incident should have been killed, and that a recent shark seen near Cottesloe beach was the same shark that fatally bit Ken Crew. He noted:

[t]here is no doubt in the view of most people who use the beach, in particular surf club members, that it is most likely the same shark returning to that place. I believe that shark will return again and that it poses a threat to people using the beach. (Cited in *Hansard*, Western Australian State Parliament 2003)

He then discussed current policies for killing sharks near beaches with Mark McGowan, speaking for the government and premier, who noted, ‘[p]rotocols have been put in place to ensure a much quicker chain of command to take steps to destroy the shark. I agree that that particular shark should have been destroyed’ (cited in *Hansard*, Western Australian State Parliament 2003).

### *Policy considerations in 2011*

In 2011, a decade after the Ken Crew incident, WA would again experience tragic shark fatalities, with three near Perth beaches over a two-month period (see Table 1). The policy responses from the government following the shark bites once again used the *Jaws* Effect.

Immediately following the third incident, the government issued its first kill order based on the policy established in 2000 after the Ken Crew tragedy. This order was grounded in the assumption that one ‘rogue’ shark may have been responsible for all of the incidents. The state dispatched a Department of Fisheries boat to try to kill the shark, but it was not successful. Fisheries Minister Norman Moore justified the shark hunt, saying:

I took the view that we have had two fatalities in roughly the same area that people would expect us to take some action in the event that it's been *the same* shark that has been responsible for two people being killed. (Cited in Miller 2011, emphasis added)

The premier, Colin Barnett, stated, 'I am very concerned that we have had three fatalities in such a short period of time' (cited in Vaughan 2011).

### *Policy considerations in 2013–14*

In 2013 and 2014, the WA government announced additional measures, including a change in policy that allowed for pre-emptively killing individual sharks that were judged to pose an 'imminent threat' (WA 2013a). The government asserted that sharks in close proximity to people were by definition a threat because, even after people were out of the water, that same individual shark might return later and injure a bather. Here, the imminent threat is not based on the danger of a minor shark bite but of a fatal event in which one shark is responsible, may return and should be killed. This policy position embodies all three themes from *Jaws*. Scientists within the government unsuccessfully contested the film narrative of rogue shark behaviour. A freedom of information request from the Humane Society International, released on 1 May 2014, included a document from the Department of Fisheries in the 'Imminent threat policy review notes' (WA 2013b), which stated that there are a number of reasons to alter projected plans. It addressed the imminent threat issue, stating:

The policy assumes that the actions are to prevent an imminent threat of attack. This cannot be proven in any case. There is abundant evidence to prove that not all sharks, even those known to be dangerous, are about to attack just because they are in the immediate area/vicinity where people are present. This again makes the policy subject to criticism. (WA 2013b: 10)

The document concludes: 'The removal of any link to "imminent" needs to occur' (WA 2013b: 10). Nevertheless, the WA government advanced the imminent threat policy.

In short, following a series of emotional events the WA government used a well-known causal story to direct blame at an individual shark, which made the issue a governable one for state authorities and directed the solution: killing the shark. Barnett spoke out on this issue using a 'tough on sharks' approach, stating: 'I am on the side of being a little more aggressive about taking sharks. There is some hesitancy throughout the community – I am not that hesitant' (*The Western Australian* 2013).

In 2014, following several failed attempts to catch white sharks, the WA government adopted a new policy using baited drum lines to target sharks in certain popular localities. With Commonwealth approval, the program was trialled with the goal being the 'capture of a significant number of large sharks close to high use swimming and surfing areas [to] reduc[e] the risk of shark attacks' (WA 2014: 7). In addition, the government would continue attempts to catch and kill individual sharks that were identified as an 'imminent' threat (WA 2014: 65).

In September 2014, Barnett illustrated the political value of the *Jaws* Effect frame as a political device to lower policy thresholds for emotional issues and enable

government action. Following a WA Environmental Protection Authority recommendation against an extension of the drum line program (EPA 2014), effectively ending the program, Barnett stated:

I think our focus will be now what do you do with perhaps a rogue shark that stays in the area and is an imminent threat to beachgoers and I think that shark has to be destroyed and moved, I don't think it's acceptable. (Cited in Orr 2014)

Indeed, following a serious shark bite incident in Esperance, WA in October 2014, a shark hunt under the imminent threat policy resulted in the killing of two protected great white sharks (Perpitch 2014).

These examples in WA highlight how a fiction-based policy may serve political goals. Telling the story of a serial killing shark helped two different governments, from two opposing parties, maintain control of the narrative and achieve their policy outputs. It may also have provided an easier path because a more scientific-based narrative meant telling the public that nothing can be done or that the government did not know what was going on. Yet, the conditions under which the use of these narratives may work are specific and depend on several factors.

### Examining when the *Jaws* Effect does not work

A remaining question from this analysis is: when do movie themes not support policy responses? I suggest that the *Jaws* Effect has been successful as a political tool because it keeps these events centred on a human–shark conflict as a way to maintain control and exclude others, but this is not always possible. This can be seen in a number of circumstances.

First, the *Jaws* Effect may not work if sharks were not a maligned group with a negative social construction and a lack of a powerful political constituency (Neff 2012). In this case, punishing sharks was perceived as politically advantageous. Second, movie myths may not work if the narrative projected a different picture of the outcome. There is a discursive monopoly on shark ‘attack’ labelling that appears to provide context and meaning. The discursive power of the phrase ‘shark attack’ presents an image and outcome from films that create the perception of a fatal event. This phrase therefore presents a one-dimensional representation that may offer a false narrative and imagery of real-life shark bite incidents (Neff and Hueter 2013). In addition, the lack of a more robust contestation of this terminology by scientists is also a key factor in the strength of the *Jaws* Effect. It may be less common for politicians and the press to use alternatives to ‘attack’ verbiage (Neff and Hueter 2013), but the use of the same term by scientists and conservationists alike sends a message that affirms a stereotypical and often false representative of real-life events. Last, movie narratives about shark behaviour may not work if there is a robust opposition from scientists, conservationists or the public. The use of movie symbolism to portray sharks as rogue, serial killers advantages the government and keeps out other stakeholders.

### Conclusion

This article has examined the concept of the *Jaws* Effect and examined the way fictional narratives from a Hollywood movie can be used as political tools in

policymaking. In the WA case study, policy discourse was more closely aligned to movie mythology than evidence-based science. Indeed, fiction was used to overwhelm competing scientific evidence. Unpacking the politics of shark bites, or any public policy issue, involves addressing the way words and images are used to paint a picture for the public and inform policy choices. This research therefore offers broader implications for policy analysis. The *Jaws* Effect is about more than one movie or the issue of shark bites. In a globally connected world, a perception of multiple, frequent or clustered emotional events is unlimited. Social media increases perceptions of frequency and intentionality as problems are linked together. The result is added distress on the public and more pressure on governments at all levels to give meaning to events. The search for answers during these periods can lead governments down many paths, including fictional films. In all, this research identifies a worrying style of policymaking where widely known fiction can be used to navigate the attribution of blame and to prescribe policy responses.

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