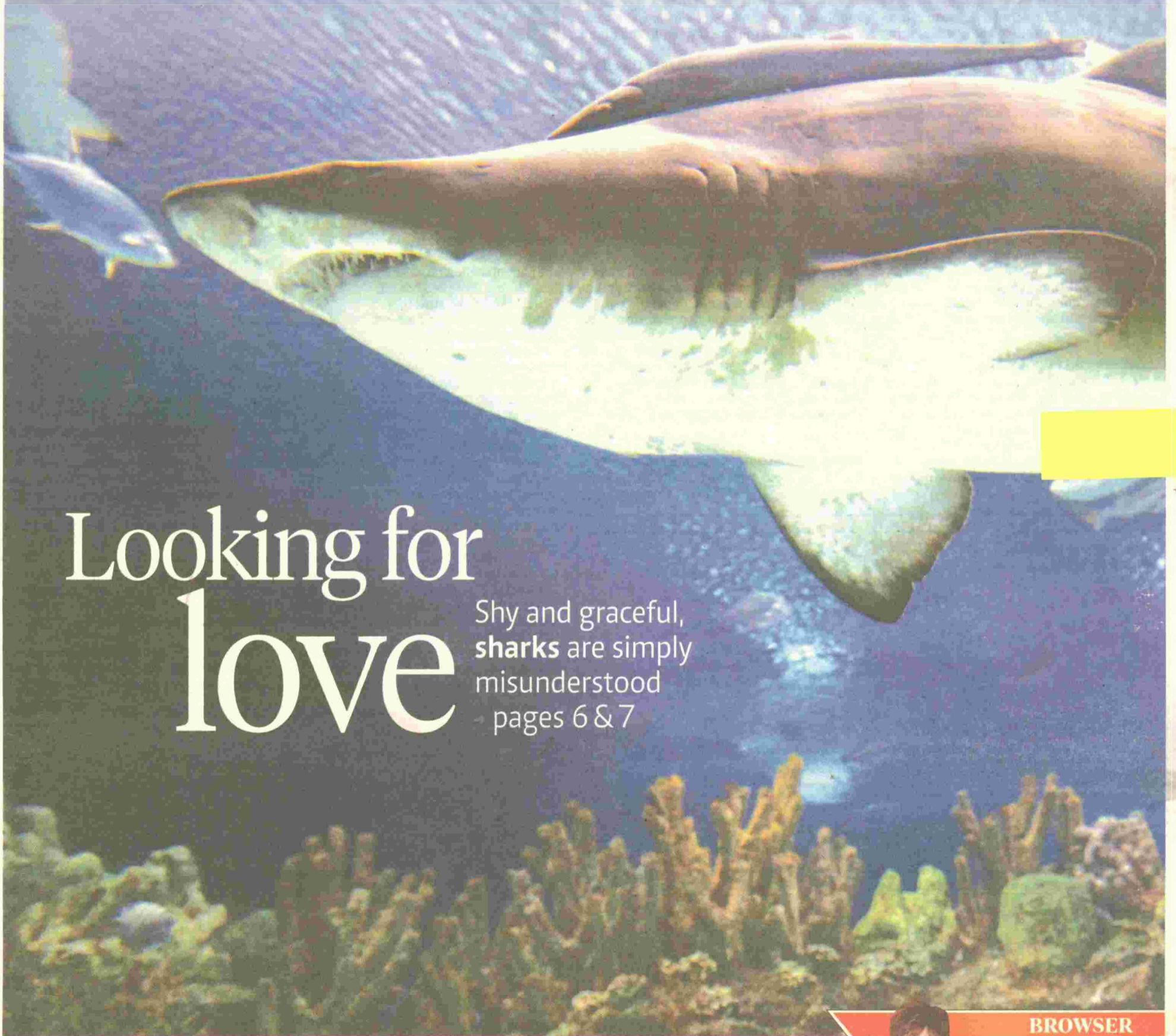


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LIFE & TIMES

NEWSUNDAYTIMES



Looking for love

Shy and graceful,
sharks are simply
misunderstood
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YOU WANT
RESPECT,
NOT FEAR

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JUST NO
STOPPING
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LIFE&TIMES **FAMILY**

A shark's skin is surprisingly soft and vulnerable



Graceful and shy, sharks are vital to the ocean's ecosystem

The misunderstood shark

Sharks may have a reputation as fierce predators, but they are shy to a fault. And their survival is in serious danger, discovers **Aneeta Sundararaj**

You're alone in a rubber dinghy with nothing but the sea for company. Then you see this "thing" swimming towards you and soon, it's circling the dinghy. (Cue music from the movie *Jaws*.) You realise it's a shark. You start to panic.

"That's a myth," says Professor Steve Oakley, consultant on shark conservation to Aquaria KLCC. "Sharks don't normally swim that close to the surface. And they don't eat humans. They prey on other fish."

Somewhat exasperated by the misconceptions about sharks, Oakley explains that when there's an attack on a human, it usually happens in murky waters. "Sharks will bite a human thinking it's a seal, sea lion, sea turtle, squid, octopus or crustacean."

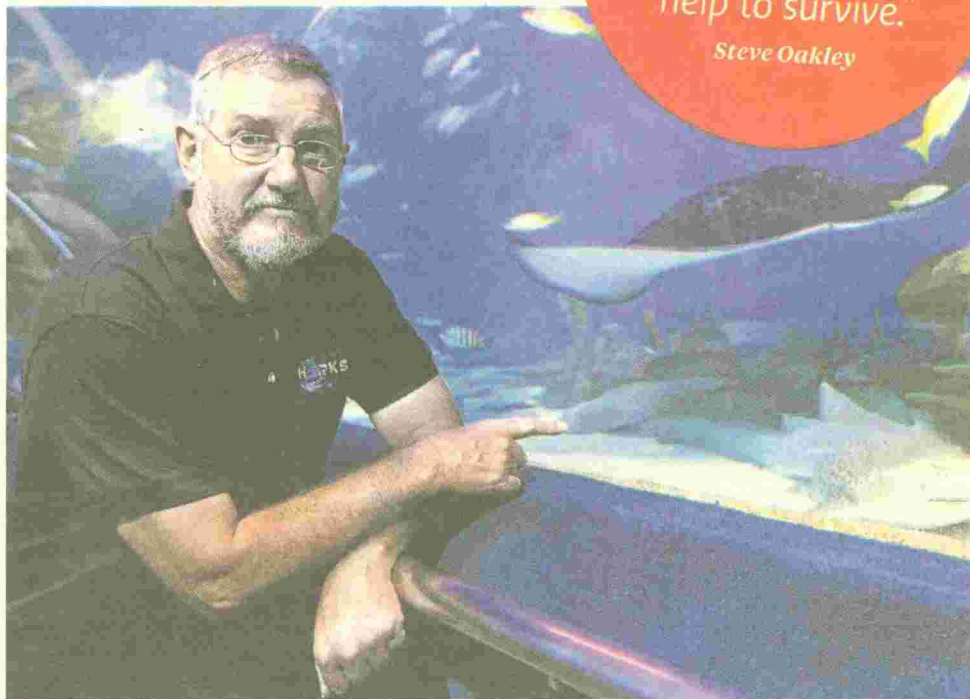
And the human is more likely to die from a shark bite because he's lost too much blood and can't get to a hospital in time.

"When they attack a surfer, sharks look up from the bottom of the sea and think the surfboard is a seal. It is simply a case of mistaken identity," he explains.

Sharks play an important role in controlling the fish population and the spread of diseases.

Oakley explains, "I like to think sharks act as the health inspector of the sea. It's like this: When we're ill, we see a doctor. Normally, when fishes are ill, they just die or become prey for sharks. Now that there are less sharks, we find that there are more sick fishes in our nets. So we end up eating sick fishes. You can't possibly have a healthy marine life when you kill 100 million of its main predator every year."

He says sharks learn to recognise divers and researchers. He recalls photographing under-



Oakley will make you fall in love with sharks with funny anecdotes about them

"Sharks are an essential part of the ocean's ecosystem and they need our help to survive."

Steve Oakley

water marine life one time when he noticed his dive buddy laughing. When he turned around, he saw a huge shark swimming away. His dive buddy later told him that the shark swam above him a few times. "It's as though the shark was curious to see what I was photographing."

Passionate about shark conservation, Oakley presents a dismal account of the dwindling shark population currently: "In some places,

there aren't any sharks left. It's not that they are extinct. There just aren't many of them in certain places."

The main reason for this dire situation is overfishing. Oakley explains: "Before, shark's fin soup was a delicacy which few could afford. Since China started becoming wealthy, the demand for this dish has increased."

"In any given place, where there used to be 100 sharks, now there may be two. What's



Four to the fore

There are over 500 species of sharks. Here are the stories of four sharks in residence at Aquaria KLCC:

Cheryl

She's a big Sand Tiger shark. More than 10 years ago, she travelled to Aquaria KLCC from her native South Africa in a specially chartered plane. Today, she's about 3m long and is in her 20s. Having overcome her teenage angst, she is now docile and ready to settle down. Professor Steve Oakley, consultant on shark conservation to Aquaria KLCC, thinks it's all a facade. "She's got some real commitment issues. Like all sharks, she allows an interested male to hold onto her fin. She drags them along for a long while. Suddenly, she'll switch directions and the poor male ends up hitting his head on a rock. He gets the message. They part ways and move on."

Batman

Sometime ago, Aquaria KLCC decided to capture (from nearby mangrove swamps) and release in captivity a school of Blacktip sharks. After a while, they started doing what comes to them naturally: hunting in a pack at night. To ensure they did not annihilate the remaining fish population, these Blacktip sharks had to be returned to the wild. All of them were caught, except the one Oakley calls Batman. Now, afraid of being caught, Batman only roams the waters of Aquaria KLCC at

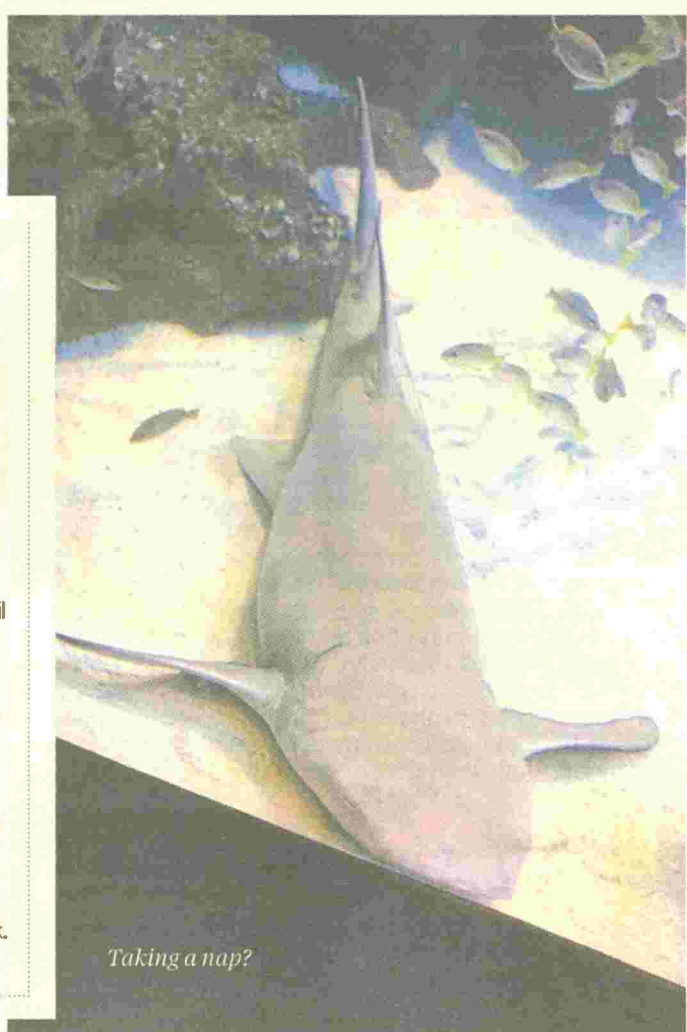
night. And since he has no friends of his kind, Oakley is sure Batman is lonely and "probably quite hungry".

Guinness

Guinness is a Tawny Nurse shark. He, too, is looking for love. But Oakley says it's going to be a long wait as this species is rare. "We're thinking of signing him up with a dating agency for sharks. His ad will read something like this: Well-to-do 25-year-old male looking for friendship. Has own space and access to food on demand. Transport can be arranged." There could be an attitude problem with Guinness, though: He's rather a dull fellow and has a warped sense of time. Visiting him in the afternoon was an anti-climax as he'd been fed and, thinking it was night, spent most of the time sleeping on the floor of the tank.

Bagheera

Bagheera is a Leopard shark. When she first arrived as a baby from Langkawi, she had stripes like a zebra's, which turned into spots when she grew older. At first, Oakley observed that she was painfully shy. She was thin and kept to herself. "Now she seems to be eating more and socialising. I think being one of the few leopard sharks here, her newfound confidence comes from knowing she's now a big fish in a small pond," says Oakley.



Taking a nap?

Aquaria KLCC is currently running **Save Our Fins**, a shark conservation campaign to get sharks recognised as an endangered species in Malaysia. **WHEN:** This three-month-long campaign starts now. A school promotion runs until Jan 2, 2012, where a Family Package for two adults and two children, is only RM99. **WHERE:** Aquaria KLCC, Concourse Level, Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre. **DETAILS:** Call 03-2333 1888 or log onto www.aquawalk.com.

more, sharks will only mate with their own species."

Looking at them swimming in the tank at Aquaria KLCC, the sharks seem graceful. Their skin is soft to the touch and it's hard to keep in mind that these painfully shy fishes are natural predators of the sea.

Oakley's voice drops when he says, "Sharks are more than just texture in a bowl of soup. We can't just use their liver and meat indiscriminately. Shark meat contains very high levels

of a poison, methyl mercury, which originates from human pollution. We shouldn't be eating shark regularly."

He adds with a sigh, "In future, I don't want to tell my grandchildren that they can only see sharks in an aquarium and not in the wild."

Adapting a famous quote, he concludes, "Sharks are not ours. They are on loan to us by our children. Sharks are an essential part of the ocean's ecosystem and they need our help to survive."

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