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## Great Australian Shark Count

What would you do if you saw a shark in the water? Does the Great White, Tiger, Whaler, White Tip, Wobbegong and Port Jackson conjure feelings of uncertainty, fear or awe? "Most people would panic and get out of the water as quickly as possible" said Dr Adam Smith, National Chair of the Australian Underwater Federation, the peak group representing underwater enthusiasts.

Skindivers are however a unique group. They love scanning the ocean for fish and also viewing the magnificent marine life that is available. They describe the awe and adrenalin rush of seeing a shark in its environment.

Nationally and internationally there are increasing concerns for the conservation of sharks due to high levels of fishing pressure and particular life history characteristics. Two prominent and controversial examples in Australia are the threatened grey nurse shark in NSW and Qld and more recently on the Great Barrier Reef, a study that concluded that some reef shark species are under threat. In each of these examples it is widely acknowledged that further monitoring data on abundance and distribution are urgently needed.

The AUF has been granted financial support of just over \$70,000 for ongoing education and monitoring. "We are delighted that the Commonwealth Minister for Fisheries The Hon Eric Abetz, has recognised the value of community monitoring, and the capability and interest of recreational fishers and skindivers to be involved" said Dr Smith.

*The Great Australia Shark Count Project* will involve community monitoring by divers, fishers, scientists and conservationists; and provide the community, managers and decision makers with a valuable data source. It will also complement other Commonwealth initiatives for monitoring Grey Nurse Sharks. Recreational fishers are prepared to be involved by participating in field monitoring and sharing their knowledge so that we can all have a greater understanding of our marine environment and how to better manage this valuable resource. The program is modeled on the successful "Great American Fish Count". "Scientists are very interested in the distribution and abundance of sharks, and community monitoring can provide useful information and education" said Dr Colin Simpfendorfer, Principal Research Fellow at James Cook University.

Dr Adam Smith, National Chair of the AUF and co-ordinator of the project said "Now is a unique opportunity to work in partnership with key national and state bodies and lay a platform for future community monitoring and management of sharks and key fisheries". All major participants will also be supported with some fantastic incentives such as calendars, t-shirts and wetsuits.

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The Australian Underwater Federation (AUF) is the national governing body for underwater sports such as underwater hockey, SCUBA, snorkel coaching and training, fin swimming, and spearfishing (a small but selective type of recreational fishing). The AUF is an associate member of Recfish Australia and is committed to working strategically together with all recreational fishers. The mission of the AUF is-

*Bring sport, conservation and awareness to the underwater world*

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