

# The Great, Great White

The monster from *Jaws* is in need of protection in New Zealand waters, according to SARAH MANKELOW

A bullet-shaped head looms out of the gloom towards you, row after row of sharp, jagged teeth propelled by a five-metre body of pure muscle. It's the stuff of nightmares. Thanks to the *Jaws* movies of the 1970s, the great white shark (*Carcharodon carcharias*) is probably one of the best known and most feared of predators – and also the most misunderstood.

Since he first wrote *Jaws* in 1974, author Peter Benchley has learnt that great white sharks are quite different from his fictional fiend that made people afraid to go into the water.

In his latest book, *Shark Trouble*, he writes: 'We knew so little back then, and have learned so much since, that I couldn't possibly write the same story today. I know now that the mythic monster I created was largely a fiction. I also know now, however, that the genuine animal is just as — if not even more — fascinating.'

Yet the legacy of *Jaws* lingers. The recent appearance of a great white shark in the headwaters of Akaroa Harbour on Banks Peninsula caused much excitement and anxiety. Alistair Hutt, Akaroa field manager for the Department of Conservation, says it was probably the same shark that caused a stir among residents last summer.

'For all we know, it could have been there all along. The thing's best left alone. It's just going about its business,' he says.

Alistair Hutt is a mate of Peter Benchley, and shares his enthusiasm for these monsters of the deep.



Great white shark photographed in New Zealand waters by Boyd McGregor of Gisborne.

BOYD MCGREGOR