After the Fact | Save the Sharks

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TRANSCRIPT

Achmat Hassiem, shark encounter survivor: After my operation, I woke up in the ICU, which is the intensive care unit. And I had my brother standing next to me, and I remember looking at him and he kind of had like these tears in his eyes. And I said, "What's up? What's wrong?"

And he said, "Thank you for saving my life." And I said, "You know, what's important is that we're both alive. And that's the most important thing."

And he says, "I know, but have you seen underneath the blanket? Underneath the covers?" And that's when I kind of lifted the covers up. And I saw that half my leg had been removed. And that's when he explained to me what actually happened, and what he actually saw.

Dan LeDuc, host: That's Achmat Hassiem. In 2006, he lost his right leg just below the knee when a 15-foot great white shark attacked him off a beach near Cape Town, South Africa. As you can imagine, it changed his life—but maybe not in the way you think.

For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan LeDuc, and this is "After the Fact."

[Music]

Dan LeDuc: Sharks can be scary to many of us. But the truth is, their encounters with humans are rare. In fact, it's the sharks that are in trouble. Our data point for this episode is 63 million. It is estimated that at least 63 million sharks are killed every year in commercial fisheries—and it's likely far more than that, with some estimates ranging as high as 273 million.

We talked with Pew's Jen Sawada more about sharks and their status.

[To Jen] So sharks can be scary creatures, but in fact, they're the ones under threat right now, I mean, in the world, with 63 million being killed every year.

Jen Sawada, officer, The Pew Charitable Trusts: That's right. At least 63 million sharks, but as many as 273 million are taken from the ocean every year.

Dan LeDuc: So could this lead to extinction of the species?

Jen Sawada: Actually more than half of known shark and ray species are threatened or near threatened with extinction.

Dan LeDuc: What's driving the demand for sharks in the ocean?

Jen Sawada: Well, commercial fishermen are targeting sharks or taking them accidentally and keeping them, mostly driven by the fin trade—the global shark fin trade. But increasingly there's a greater demand for the shark meat.

Dan LeDuc: So why the emphasis on sharks? What is so important about their role in the ecosystem?

Jen Sawada: Sharks play a really important role in balancing out our marine ecosystems, such as coral reefs. They maintain the populations of fish in the system, and they help strengthen those populations by culling the sick. And if you remove them, studies have shown that there can be negative impacts on those systems.

Dan LeDuc: So lots has been done on behalf of sharks over the last 10 years. It almost started with a public awareness that this stuff needed to be done that is now starting to lead to things like new laws, shark sanctuaries. What more needs to be done?

Jen Sawada: Sharks are dying all over the world. It's a global issue. Currently there's 17 shark sanctuaries around the world. There are now 20 species of sharks and rays, which are flat sharks, that now have trade restrictions, and there's a lot of different countries who also manage their sharks in different ways with different measures. Many countries still lack management plans or conservation measures, so more countries need to continue to restrict their trade, establish shark sanctuaries—meaning banning shark fishing within their waters—more research is always needed, and of course that public awareness needs to continue.

Dan LeDuc: Sharks are fished a lot, but there's been some studies that show they have value if they're still in the water. What kind of research has been done on that?

Jen Sawada: Yeah. There are a number of studies that have shown that sharks are worth more alive than dead. Specifically in the Pacific, there's been a study on Fiji, and how shark tourism has contributed $42.2 million to the economy—and that's an annual

amount—as opposed to if you fish a shark out of the water, it could be a one-time value of $108.

[Music]

Dan LeDuc: Pew's numbers show the challenges facing sharks. But increasingly, people are starting to pay attention to their plight. One reason is that, surprisingly, some of the most effective spokespeople for sharks are those that have been bitten by them. We return to Achmat Hassiem. We spoke with him from his home in Cape Town via Skype.

Dan LeDuc: I was hoping you could take us back to this day in 2006. You were in South Africa, near Cape Town, and you went to the beach. What kind of a day was it?

Achmat Hassiem: So it was a Sunday morning. A typical Sunday morning here in Cape Town during the summer. You know, we had a bit of overcast weather. The water was perfect.

Dan LeDuc: So you were a lifeguard, and that day you were doing a routine training mission with your friend and your brother—right?

Achmat Hassiem: Yeah, so what would happen in this scenario is that we would have multiple patients in the water that need rescuing. Who, on that day, was myself, my brother, and a friend. So we were going to act out as the patients that needed rescuing.

Dan LeDuc: And so what happened? You're out floating in this water. How deep was the water that you were in?

Achmat Hassiem: So I was about two meters depth, which is almost my height. And so basically tiptoeing in the water, and the water was just over my head. And then my brother was another 10 meters away from me. And I look over towards my right, and I see there's a little triangle moving on top of the water. And this triangle just becomes bigger and bigger and starts moving towards my brother.

Dan LeDuc: And you pretty quickly realized that triangle was a fin.

Achmat Hassiem: That's when I decided to just see what is attached to this triangle. And I looked underneath the water, and I distinctively recognized the black top and the white bottom. And that's when I knew I was coming face to face with a 4.7-meter great white shark, moving towards my brother.

I immediately turned around, towards the lifeguards, and I screamed at them, and I said, "Go get my brother out of the water. Get him out, get him out." And I immediately

thought to myself, “You know what, they're just not going to get to my brother in time.” So what I did was, I started drumming on top of the water.

Dan LeDuc: And you are just splashing away, trying to divert the shark's attention from your brother, but what that meant was, the shark's attention turned to you.

Achmat Hassiem: Yes. So obviously, I mean, he's my little brother. And so without even thinking, I just started drumming on top of the water and that's when I saw that fin just turn and come towards me. And as the lifeguards got to my brother in the rescue boat, they started pulling him into the rescue boat.

Next thing I know, the shark comes up on my right-hand side but doesn't attack me at first. It just comes up from the right, like just swimming slowly towards me from the right. I immediately just got frightened, and I started kind of doing a very funny backstroke. Because I was panicking at the time.

And as we know, sharks don't have hands, so they can't kind of reach out and feel what you are. So, the only way they can do that is by using their mouths. So, within a matter of seconds—like literally split seconds—the shark managed to turn its massive body around, and I was face to face with this 4.7-meter great white just charging at me.

Dan LeDuc: None of us have been that close to a shark in those kinds of circumstances.

Achmat Hassiem: I mean, if you picture like, you know, a great white’s unhinging its jaw as it's coming for you and kind of gnawing forward, and you just see these rows of razor blades. And uh, I was just thinking to myself, you know, “I just got to stay away from its teeth.” So what I did at that point was I reached out and took my left hand and actually put it on top of the shark’s nose.

Dan LeDuc: Wow.

Achmat Hassiem: What I thought of was that I could just move myself on the side of the shark's head, and take my—the left side of my hip and push it to the side of the shark’s head. And then take my right leg and then throw it over the shark, and kind of maybe just scoot over until I get to the dorsal fin.

Dan LeDuc: So you tried to climb on him.

Achmat Hassiem: I mean, it sounds crazy, but you know, no one's ever tried it. So that's what I decided to do. And as I pulled my right leg forward to throw it over the shark's head, my right leg didn't want to come forward. And that's when I realized that half my leg was in the shark's mouth already. That's when the shark just pulled me down. And I

just remember just moving on top of the water. And then eventually just being underwater.

And you're probably thinking to yourself, “Wow, that sounds absolutely terrible.” But the worst part of it all was listening to the sound of the rescue boat’s engine disappearing in the background as I got pulled further and further towards the depth of the ocean.

Dan LeDuc: Because you knew that rescue boat was further and further away from you, then.

Achmat Hassiem: At that point that rescue boat was my only hope of survival. I thought to myself, “You know what, this is it. This is where the chapter of Achmat Hassiem ends.” You know? And I kind of just thought back to, had I done everything that I wanted to achieve? Had I—what did I say to my parents last? What did I say to my brother?

And I kind of told myself that I didn't achieve everything I wanted to achieve in life yet. So that kind of spurred me on to fight back. And I mean they tell you, in movies that you gotta try all these different types of things. Like you know, punch it in the nose. Or kind of take your finger and push it into its eye. And believe you me, I tried all of that. And nothing worked.

And I eventually realized, “Hey, wait. Behind the shark’s eye is a massive scar.” And what I did was, I took my hands, and I kind of dug it into that scar, and I tried to pull that scar apart as hard as I could. And that's when the shark didn't like that at all and kind of just shook me again underneath the water. And I could feel this weird sensation in my shinbone. And the next thing I know, boom, this thing just snaps in half.

And I'm now kind of pushing myself away from the shark. And more than anything I needed to breathe. So I immediately started swimming towards the surface from underneath the water. Got to the surface, took my left hand, flung it out of the water, hoping that the lifeguards would see the splash.

And the next thing I know, as this black belly comes closer and closer towards me, I realize that it's my brother really reaching over the side of the rescue boat. He grabs me by the hand and immediately starts pulling, tugging at me.

As my brother pulled me into the rescue boat, the shark hits the underside of the rescue boat with so much force that we actually shifted a bit. I fell into the rescue boat. My brother jumped on top of me, closed my eyes with his one hand, grabbed what was left over from my leg to kind of create a tourniquet with his other hand.

And the next thing I know, we were full throttling back towards the shoreline, with my brother just kind of speaking to me. And I mean, I remember asking him questions. Like, “Tariq, how bad is it?”

And he's like, “Yeah, don't worry, you're going to be fine. Just got a little cut on your foot.” And that's just another lifesaving technique to keep the patient calm, which it worked perfectly.

Dan LeDuc: Wow, you saved your brother and then he saved you. How long were you in the hospital?

Achmat Hassiem: So I was in the hospital for about a week. I mean I was lying there. And you know just thinking about all these different feelings and emotions. And I mean I went through a roller coaster of emotions.

Dan LeDuc: But you did have support to help you recover, right?

Achmat Hassiem: Yeah, definitely. I mean, my friends and my family are the most amazing people you could possibly wish for. They were by my side all the time. Everyone made sure that I was okay. You know, when you do lose a limb, you are faced with many challenges. Everything that I took for granted, everything that was so simple, like just going to the bathroom or just taking a shower. I mean, things you don't even think of. All of a sudden these things became a bit of a mission.

Dan LeDuc: How did you feel about the shark at that point? Were you mad at it?

Achmat Hassiem: You know, I grew up next to the ocean. My dad's a fisherman. So my dad kind of taught me everything that I needed to know about the ocean. And most of all, he taught me to respect the ocean. Because, number one, you know it gives us a means, a way to survive. Number two, we've got to look after the ocean. And I never had a grudge for the shark itself, because I knew that, whenever I went into the ocean, I was going into another creature's territory. I knew for a fact that the ocean belongs to them. And I was going into it at my own risk.

Dan LeDuc: And then one day you got a call from Debbie Salamone.

Achmat Hassiem: So this is when the story gets pretty interesting. In 2010, I got a call from Debbie, asking me to be part of a campaign.

Dan LeDuc: Okay, at this point we need to pause Achmat's story and rewind a couple years before his shark encounter, back to 2004. To a remote Florida beach that's part of the Cape Canaveral National Seashore.

[Sounds of beach surf, seagulls]

Dan LeDuc: So when was the last time you've been out here?

Debbie Salamone, officer, The Pew Charitable Trusts: Oh, it's been a number of years now. Yeah. I don't really, uh, come here. I guess I would be a little bit too nervous. *[Chuckles]*

Dan LeDuc: I mean, do you go to the beach at all?

Debbie Salamone: I do go to the beach—

Dan LeDuc: Or is it just this beach?

Debbie Salamone: Yeah, no, I do go to the beach, but I go to beaches that have more people, and I feel a little bit safer for some reason. You know, they say swim in groups and—

Dan LeDuc: Right.

Debbie Salamone: But I loved this beach. And I still do like it. It's just so beautiful and serene and peaceful. There's no development. You walk over this wonderful boardwalk, and you hear the ocean, and you see how majestic it is.

Dan LeDuc: Do you mind going down to the surf?

Debbie Salamone: No, no, no. I love the surf.

Dan LeDuc: So, take me back to this day in August. It's 2004.

Debbie Salamone: Yeah. It was a perfectly nice summer day, just like it is today. The ocean smelled beautiful and salty, and the waves are crashing, and I'm jumping up and down. You know, riding some of them to shore, having a great time. And it was later in the afternoon, so a thunderstorm started rolling in. And I knew I had to get out of the water. So I turned around to face the shore. And I started walking in, and all of a sudden, this big fish just jumps out of the water right next to me. And, I thought, "Uh-oh. That's not a good sign."

Dan LeDuc: Why?

Debbie Salamone: Because that could mean there's a predator nearby. That fish is trying to escape.

Dan LeDuc: This fish was scared and getting out of Dodge.

Debbie Salamone: Yeah. And it was smarter than I was, because it jumped out of the water, and my foot was still in, and the shark grabbed right on the back of my heel.

Dan LeDuc: Did you ever actually see him?

Debbie Salamone: No, I never saw the shark. And I kicked wildly to get it off, but it just bit down harder. So I just thought to myself, "Oh, my God, don't seem like prey, fight." And I started screaming, "It's got me, it's got me!" And I tried to get out of the water. And I felt like the shark might still be on my foot. I couldn't tell what was happening. And so every step became more difficult because my Achilles tendon was completely severed.

Dan LeDuc: Oh, my.

Debbie Salamone: And so I was stumbling through the waves trying to get to shore. And my companion grabbed me by the hands—came running up, grabbed me by the hands and pulled me out of the water the rest of the way.

Fortunately, a nurse happened to be coming by, which was amazing. She was taking a walk. She came running and grabbed my beach towel and wrapped up my foot and got all the pieces together and then put pressure on and got most of the bleeding to stop until help could arrive.

Dan LeDuc: Another thought went through your head, because what people may not know about you is—you are a ballroom dancer.

Debbie Salamone: It was just my worst nightmare. My foot, here it is in shreds and I thought I could never dance again.

Dan LeDuc: Yeah, yeah.

Debbie Salamone: I was worried that I wouldn't be able to walk again.

Dan LeDuc: What people may not know about you, also, is even at the time of your attack you were working as an environmental journalist here in Florida, cared about the

environment. What was going through your mind after a shark attack, given what you did for a living?

Debbie Salamone: Since I have spent a good portion of my career writing about the environment and had always cared about it personally, I just felt completely betrayed. I mean, here I am working to save the ocean, and then the ocean turns on me. I was very angry. I hated sharks. I just—I lost my way. I didn't feel a passion for the environment any longer. I really was lost.

Dan LeDuc: Yeah. But things have changed a lot for you. How did your thinking evolve?

Debbie Salamone: Over time, I was searching for a reason. There are only about 80 people on the entire planet who are bitten by a shark each year. Why me?

Dan LeDuc: Yeah.

Debbie Salamone: You have to look for some reason. You have to search for some—something. Why did this happen? And after a period of time, I saw this as more of a test of my commitment to environmental conservation. So I got a master's degree in environmental sciences and policy. I became the environmental editor at my paper. And then in 2009, I joined The Pew Charitable Trusts, which has a global shark conservation campaign.

Dan LeDuc: More than that, you started something more.

Debbie Salamone: I started Shark Attack Survivors for Shark Conservation. I recruited the world's worst injured shark attack survivors, because I felt that they could feel like I did. That we could turn tragedy into something really positive. We could become the best spokespeople for sharks.

Dan LeDuc: Was it hard to find those folks? Had they, in fact, made the transformation you had?

Debbie Salamone: Surprisingly, yeah. I sort of felt that a lot of people who come to the beach and are regular beachgoers—you know, the surfers and the like and divers and all—they have a passion for the sea. And did they all lose that, too? I couldn't imagine. You know, I bet that they would be willing to help out. And it was true. Almost everyone I called was so positive and thought, yes, I'd be so happy to join your cause.

And one of them was Achmat Hassiem from South Africa.

[Music]

Dan LeDuc: Now we jump back into Achmat's story—when he gets that call from Debbie.

Achmat Hassiem: In 2010, I got a call from Debbie, asking me to be part of a campaign, which is the Shark Attack Survivors for Shark Conservation campaign.

Dan LeDuc: I've got to stop here for one second, though. Did you think that that was a little crazy at first? Or did you think that this was the perfect idea?

Achmat Hassiem: To be honest, I thought it was a hoax at first. I kind of thought that this was probably one of the most craziest things I've ever heard of. I wasn't too knowledgeable about sharks itself. And I just decided, you know, to go with it.

And the next thing they told me, "We're going to fly you to the States to meet up with a bunch of shark attack survivors from all over the world." Including famous people like Mike Coots, who does photography and surfs as well. And Debbie herself. And a whole lot of the cool, amazing people. So, I mean, it gave me great privilege to be part of this group.

And then, while being with this group, I kind of learned more and more about the importance of sharks in the ocean, and how it is important for us to protect our oceans, and to protect these sharks within our oceans, and the role they play in it.

And that's when I realized how important it is for us to actually speak up and protect our oceans, so that my kids and my kids' kids can know what a great white looks like in the wild. Or to know what these creatures are. And—before they become extinct. We have the opportunity to save them right now.

Dan LeDuc: So it sort of makes sense for survivors to be the ones talking about sharks, who are—need their own help right now.

Achmat Hassiem: Yeah, definitely. I mean, who better to speak up for sharks than a shark attack survivor?

Dan LeDuc: You—since your incident, your life has changed in so many ways. And beyond the sort of natural adjustments that any human being would have to make, having lost a limb. You mentioned you've gone on to compete in Paralympic Games. What else have you been doing?

Achmat Hassiem: I mean, obviously since then it's been absolutely amazing, the journey since then. I lost my leg in 2006. I met one of South Africa's or the world's biggest Paralympians, who was a swimmer by the name of Natalie du Toit.

And she came up to me, and she said, “Achmat, you know, why don't you get into the water and see what you can do?” And I took to the water like a shark in the ocean, really. I fell in love with the stroke called butterfly. And I went to my first national championships in 2007. And I went on to set many South African swimming records in my category. And from there I found myself at the 2008 Beijing Paralympic trials, which were held in Durban in South Africa. Next thing I know, I swam a qualifying time, and I find myself on a plane, with Team South Africa, representing my country quite proudly at the Beijing Paralympic Games in China.

Dan LeDuc: I have to say, your life has turned out so differently than it might have, because of a shark attack.

Achmat Hassiem: I mean, I'm sitting here today, speaking to you guys, and I realize, you know what? I've achieved everything I wanted to achieve in life. And it's all because of that shark. And I just feel, you know what, I got to give back to the shark.

And that is what I'm doing today. I am standing out as a proud advocate for sharks all around the world. And more importantly, that our oceans can thrive by having these species in them.

Dan LeDuc: Achmat, thanks so much—and we wish you continued good luck.

[Music]

Dan LeDuc: Debbie and I got off of the beach to talk a bit more.

[To Debbie] As you got this group underway, was that in fact the experience? Did people pay attention?

Debbie Salamone: Yes, we have had numerous successes. We went to the U.S. Capitol, where we were able to get more congressional representatives to sign on to legislation that closed loopholes in the nation's shark finning ban. And we've also gone to the United Nations to ask for shark conservation measures. Plus, we've spoken out in favor of shark sanctuaries, where commercial shark fishing is banned.

Dan LeDuc: Your story and so many of the other survivors is really about human resilience. People who meet you will see a big smile on your face a lot of the time. How can you go through what you went through and be this way?

Debbie Salamone: Well, if we hadn't been able to save sharks and make a difference, this injury would have just been for nothing. I would have felt like it was such a waste.

And I might have lived with a negative attitude about sharks. But being able to do something positive is just so fulfilling that you don't question your purpose anymore.

[Music]

Dan LeDuc: Debbie is walking pretty well these days but still needs daily exercises to stretch and stay nimble—after all, she does hope to return to the ballroom dance floor.

And Achmat continues to travel the world representing the Paralympic Games and advocating for shark conservation.

To learn more about the Shark Attack Survivors group as well as Pew's global shark conservation work, point your browser to pewtrusts.org/afterthefact.

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Thanks for listening. For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan LeDuc, and this is "After the Fact."

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