

## The perils for tourism lurking offshore

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**The issue** The effect of shark attacks and oil spills on tourism industries.

**Where we stand** Misperceptions are damaging, but real risks are devastating.

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It'll undoubtedly be a while before the full effect of the summer of the shark can be measured.

This much is clear: 2015's attacks - so far confined to North Carolina's beaches - can't be good for tourism. People are staying out of the water, and it's simply not possible to have a breakfast in Nags Head without overhearing visitors calculating the risks of swimming.

If there's any consolation, it is that this has happened before, at almost every beach on every continent.

Through the first week of July, sharks attacked eight people in North Carolina, most recently a Marine in Surf City. That's out of hundreds of thousands of visitors.

Tourism, as anybody in the business will tell you, is about perception as well as reality. The reality is that sharks almost never attack people, none of the victims this year have been killed and it has been more than a decade since a similar run of bites. Nevertheless, the perception, at the moment, is that sharks are everywhere on our shore.

It's not true, but the perception will have an effect, if not on the number of tourists who travel to this region, at least on their behavior while they're here.

Just ask the folks along the Gulf of Mexico. Eleven people died when the Deepwater Horizon rig exploded in 2010.

But then BP's efforts at capping the well failed time after increasingly frantic time. As 3.19 million barrels of oil spilled, it washed onto beaches and into wetlands. It suffocated marine

life and reefs. Fishermen couldn't fish. Tourists canceled their trips. Day visitors stayed away.

The effort transformed BP's well-groomed corporate image into jokes about incompetence and even malevolence. It also did a number on the Gulf.

Tourism officials claim that everything has recovered. Yet reports of new tar balls and tar mats - the sizes and frequencies of which have been greater than previously, naturally-occurring discoveries - washing ashore persist, raising fears about sullied beaches and contaminated waters.

All that cost BP \$18.7 billion in a proposed settlement announced this month.

"It would resolve the states' natural resources damage claims and settle economic claims involving state and local governments in Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas, according to an outline filed in federal court," the AP reported.

There's no question that BP owes the gulf states huge amounts of money for the damage it did to their coastlines, to their finances, and to their tourism. It has already paid billions in clean-up costs, and to compensate businesses.

But it's not clear that any amount of money can bring back tourists expecting pristine beaches. Or restore the reputation of gulf seafood. Or even pay for the cleanup of square miles of dead seafloor.

When the water cools in North Carolina, the sharks will move on, as they always do. So will the tourists.

For our friends along the Gulf of Mexico, the real damage to life and business in the gulf will linger long after BP writes that last check.

<http://hamptonroads.com/2015/07/perils-tourism-lurking-offshore>