

REACTION PAPER TO THE 2022/23 NSW SHARK MESHING PROGRAM ANNUAL PERFORMANCE REPORT

EFFICACY CONTINUES TO DECLINE, A FAILURE ON ALL FRONTS



The release of the [Shark Meshing \(Bather Protection\) Program 2022/23 Annual Performance Report](#) highlights that without doubt, the day for shark nets to be withdrawn from beaches has come.

Despite the failure of the program to measurably meet its objectives, as was also confirmed by the NSW Threatened Species Scientific Committee (TSSC) last year in their [Response](#) to the Shark Meshing (Bather Protection) Program 2021/2022 Annual Performance Report, we fear that the NSW government appears set to continue with the 2023/24 meshing season slated to start again September 1st.

This year's annual performance report again paints a clear picture of a program struggling to justify its existence, and whilst the previous Government chose to ignore this, the new Government absolutely should not.

Ineffective and Irrelevant

Irrespective of our organisations view of catching sharks as a beach safety measure, the mathematical reality is clear. With the ever increasing deployment of SMART drumlines along the NSW coastline, and ever increasing target shark catches made by those devices, the shark net program has seen a dwindling catch rate of target sharks in recent years.

Of the three shark species targeted by the program (white sharks, tiger shark and bull sharks), only tiger sharks and white sharks were caught this past shark net season. Further, there were only 24 target sharks caught by shark nets in the entire state of NSW, during the entire 22/23 shark net season, with zero of these being at Sydney beaches. Less than 10% of total shark net catches are target sharks.

Given the Department of Primary Industries' (DPI) increased rollout of SMART drumlines, this years performance report demonstrates irrefutably that shark nets are as at today, wildly unsuited to the task

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of catching target sharks, and that removing shark nets from all NSW beaches poses little to no risk, and removing them from Sydney beaches poses zero risk, given they now have zero target catch.

[Performance reports](#), past and present, show a clear lack of correlation between shark net target shark catch, and human-shark incidents. Reduced shark incidents in this years report absolutely cannot be correlated to the shark net program, since the program also has markedly reduced target catch. This point alone renders this program utterly irrelevant.

Disregard for Marine Life

In addition to the program's ineffectiveness at offering any level of beach safety, its continued operation shows a blatant disregard for the environment and marine life which requires urgent attention from the Environment Minister.

Shark nets continue to indiscriminately kill non-target species, including threatened and protected species, revealing a program that cares little about animal welfare or conservation.

The performance report again this year notes that more than 90% of the catch were non-target animals, totalling 204, including harmless sharks, rays, turtles, dolphins and seals. Shark net checking frequency remains an entirely inadequate 72 hours.



Environmental Impact

The collateral damage caused by this program is staggering. Non-target species of high tourism value and community interest, including turtles, dolphins, and sharks, fall victim to this indiscriminate netting. The NSW government must wake up to the harsh reality that this program is detrimental to marine biodiversity, and take action.

The release of the 2022/23 performance report comes without any indication of how the government will address the scientific and environmental inadequacies of the program (in addition to the inadequacies in efficacy outlined earlier) and is just another report outlining the negative impact to the environment that the government seems set on ignoring.

Continued Futile Reporting

DPI's annual performance reports have become nothing more than a broken record, regurgitating the same failures year after year. Other than being a requirement of the Joint Management Agreement, it is unclear what purpose the reporting serves. It is not used to inform changes and improvements to the program. It is not used to reduce contractor incompetence and data inaccuracy (observers were present for only 22% of net checks and in any case, according to the report, "Observers continued to focus on ensuring collection of biological samples in accordance with the Strategic Research and Monitoring Program" rather than on data collection accuracy). The TSSC's response to the report each year is ignored.

The purpose of the reporting remains entirely unclear, appearing to serve no constructive aim, other than to highlight the program's inability to meet its objectives.

A Pretense of Safety

If the primary objective of the meshing program is to protect bathers, it has been a [failure](#) for as long as the program has existed. Only mistaking correlation for causation can (wrongly) support its efficacy. Shark incidents have not reduced at beaches with shark nets, but fatalities have. This is due to lifeguards, not shark nets. The government's blatant disregard for human safety by supporting a program that relies on a myth of safety, is deeply troubling.

The world is changing, and so should our approach to shark bite mitigation. Instead, the NSW government clings to outdated 1930s methods that are demonstrably ineffective. It's time to embrace modern, science-based alternatives that prioritise coexistence with marine life rather than blindly continuing this archaic meshing program.

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Meshing Program Must Cease Immediately

Faced with this overwhelming evidence of the meshing program's failure in every regard, we trust that Minister for the Environment Penny Sharpe, and Minister responsible for the meshing program Tara Moriarty, will end the meshing program immediately. In Envoy Foundation's opinion, anything less is simply negligent to the duties of both portfolios.

It is time for the NSW government to act responsibly, listen to scientific expertise, listen to communities and councils, and abandon this futile and destructive program once and for all.

A bold shift away from the ineffective meshing program is not just a choice; it is an urgent necessity. The legacy of our actions today will shape the future, and we owe it to ourselves, our environment, and future generations to make the right decision. The time for action is now.

Minister Sharpe and Minister Moriarty, until they take appropriate action, must be held to the highest standards of accountability. Their detachment from the program's inefficiency and their disregard for the safety of beachgoers and marine life reveal a serious lack of responsibility and judgment.

Summary

We are deeply troubled by this report which clearly shows, like so many before it, that the time for shark nets to be discontinued is now.

Prior to the NSW election this year Labor called for the government to explore non-lethal shark protection methods, like SMART drumlines and drone surveillance, while addressing concerns from stakeholders. A key component of Labor's message was that Labor would support the reassessment of shark nets to move towards non-lethal new technologies once they are proven. They are now proven, so that time is now.

We call on Minister Tara Moriarty to do what her predecessors were unwilling to do; listen to scientists, listen to the community, listen to local councils, and move with technology. The shark nets must not return to NSW beaches on September 1st, or ever again. It is the 21st century, it is the time for modern non-lethal technologies to keep beaches safe.

References

NSW Shark Meshing Performance Reports, Agreements and Reviews from 2012 to 2023, <https://www.sharksmart.nsw.gov.au/shark-nets>

NSW Government Survey Report, Preferred Shark Mitigation Measures of NSW Coastal Councils and their Communities, June 2021, https://www.sharksmart.nsw.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0015/1327200/preferred-shark-mitigation-measures-of-NSW-Coastal-Councils-and-Communities-2021.pdf

Envoy Foundation Investigation: NSW Shark Meshing Program, June 2023, <https://www.envoy.foundation/files/ugd/1d67c4fe112a0ff6f4d6683f9f874c8c8fa10.pdf>

NSW Threatened Species Scientific Committee Response to the Shark Meshing (Bather Protection) Program 2021/2022 Annual Performance Report, https://www.sharksmart.nsw.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf

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