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Guy Harvey Ultimate Shark Challenge blends conservation, competitive fishing

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PUNTA GORDA, FLA. -- "Shark on!" comes the shout from a group of anglers who have managed to snag a prized ocean predator -- and a chase boat speeds off after them at nearly 60 miles an hour. The scientists and tournament organizers pull alongside and watch as the fishermen carefully measure and tag the shark, tethered in the water alongside their boat and hopefully no worse for wear.

Most shark tournaments follow a similar ritual: Contestants haul up sharks and bring them back to the dock, where the by now dead animals are weighed and measured so judges can declare a winner. But in the Guy Harvey Ultimate Shark Challenge, which had a qualifying competition earlier this month and will culminate in a final round of fishing this weekend, the sharks get away with their lives.

The idea of catching sharks and freeing them for entertainment is a new twist on the old sport -- the latest effort by conservationists and scientists to protect dwindling shark populations.

With some shark species, such as oceanic whitetip and porbeagle, declining by more than 90 percent in some regions because of intense demand for their fins and meat, environmentalists and some policymakers are seeking to impose new restrictions on shark fishing both off U.S. shores and around the globe. But these efforts have had mixed success. Last month Hawaii became the first state to ban the sale, distribution or possession of shark fins, for example, but this spring delegates at the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Fauna and Flora rejected several trade restrictions.

To help change public attitudes toward sharks, Sean Paxton and Brooks Paxton, two brothers in the entertainment business who grew up fishing sharks in the Chesapeake Bay with their grandfather, came up with the idea of transforming a traditional "kill" tournament into a live spectator sport. Attendees could watch streaming video from competing boats as they hooked and tagged the animals so scientists could track them after the contest ended.

"It's a labor of love that's involved all of us, to change people's attitudes about the use of resources," Sean Paxton said in an interview, as he monitored the preliminary round of fishing from a chase boat

this month. Keeping recreational fishermen and their fans interested, he said, involves "taking the spectacle of dead sharks out of the sport and replacing it with a live video."

Recreational fishing takes a major toll on sharks: Federal officials estimate that recreational landings of large coastal sharks outpaced commercial catches for 15 out of 21 years between 1981 and 2001, with a take of 12 million sharks, skates and rays in 2004 alone.

"Sharks need help, and kill tournaments villify sharks," said the U.S. Humane Society's senior vice president, John Grandy, whose group has endorsed the contest. "They prey on the reputations of sharks as destructive creatures. What we need now is for people to understand that sharks are in serious trouble."

Wendy Benchley, whose late husband, Peter, shaped popular perceptions of sharks with his book "Jaws," also backs the tournament, which is sponsored by the Guy Harvey Ocean Foundation.

"We're at a different age now when it comes to shark conservation," said Robert Hueter, who directs the Sarasota-based Mote Marine Laboratory's center for shark research. "A lot of these species are in seriously bad shape. And we can learn a lot more from the live shark than the dead shark at this time." The Mote Marine Laboratory and Aquarium is playing host this weekend and overseeing the competition's scientific aspects.

Although Mote has trained observers to ride on each boat to ensure the sharks are caught, tagged and released properly so that scientists can track their movements and behavior, the venture still rests on anglers' willingness to abandon some of their old practices.

Judging from the first round of fishing, which narrowed the field from nine teams to five, fishermen are willing to give it a try. As Hueter, the Paxton brothers and the rest of their monitoring team caught up with Team Redzone on their chase boat, they found Jay Withers and Mike Manis carefully measuring and tagging a 5-foot 6-inch blacktip shark as it floated on the line in the water.

The catch was enough to qualify Withers and Manis for the finals: As Withers worked on de-hooking the shark, he shouted to the scientists and organizers, "When we saw that on the line, I said, 'That's the one!'"

Wither and Manis participate in roughly 20 redfish contests a year; for them, shark fishing is new. But this weekend's competition -- the final rounds are Friday through Sunday -- has also attracted Bucky Dennis, a shark fishing champion who set a world record a four years ago by catching a 14 1/2 -foot hammerhead weighing 1,262 pounds. When he brought the shark back to shore, Mote scientists -- who agreed to accept the specimen -- discovered one of the reasons it was so large was because there were 55 dead pups inside.

"Everything is changing," Dennis said, adding that in the past, killing sharks "was the only way to do the record. . . . We don't have to do that anymore."

But it will still take a little explaining. As the chase boat pulled up to the Burnt Store Marina three weeks ago, a man fishing nearby called out to Sean Paxton, "Where's the sharks?"

"We left them out there, to make more sharks," he replied.