

2016: Sharks in a post-truth world

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Year's end is always a time for retrospection, and particularly in a year as eventful as 2016. So this holiday season, while gathered in front of the hearth, my thoughts inevitably turned to what happened last year in politics and the politics of shark conservation – and why. Would the bitter wind currently causing the fire to flicker and pop blow harmlessly over, or would it sweep away all but the most firmly anchored objects in its path?



Caveat Carcharhinus: a vulnerable oceanic whitetip shark (*Carcharhinus longimanus*) peers suspiciously ahead (image: Jean-Marie Reverdel, Flickr).

For those of you who might have missed it, the Oxford Dictionary named ‘post-truth’ as word-of-the-year for 2016. Although the term was coined long ago, Brexit and the US presidential election are given credit for the spike in its usage of around 2000% last year.² Given the two countries’ referendum results, whether it’s just a phrase or a phenomenon, post-truth situations in which ‘objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief’ are likely to be with us for a while.

Does this sound familiar? As I mulled over the 2016 milestones in sharks – with the benefit of a glass of mulled holiday cheer and some retrospective news programmes – I took little comfort from the parallel trends. But firstly, here are some confessions from me. I have to admit that I still cling to the rather old-fashioned view that science

is supposed to be about truth, or at least the best we can discern it given uncertainty. I also believe that science-based shark management and conservation policy is critical while acknowledging, often painfully, that science is but one of many elements of national and international decision-making. Finally, I need to disclose that I’ve never understood how public policy is supposed to apply the ‘precautionary principle’. What is considered precautionary varies wildly between stakeholders, and while the term is often mentioned in decision-making, it is rarely defined or explained. So, if you’ll pardon the expression, when does it trump science?

Of course, for the most economically valuable fish stocks we are making progress in defining and eventually quantifying what the margins of precaution should be through reference points and harvest control rules, but these tools

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² <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/nov/15/post-truth-named-word-of-the-year-by-oxford-dictionaries>

are likely years away for sharks. As a result, we find ourselves in a post-truth zone where we have more shark data than ever before but we seem to be relying on it less and less to shape policy. Instead, shark policy, like other current international issues, is being shaped by the following synergistic post-truth forces:

- ✓ **Too much noise, not enough signal.** I get it. Even as someone focused on shark issues, there is a continuous and often overwhelming surge of information that makes it challenging to interpret the latest developments. No wonder then that the general public finds it difficult to know whether sharks are really 'going extinct' or whether such reports are distortions constructed from biased or incomplete data reviews. I'm sure I'm in the same boat when asked about global warming: how many papers have I actually read and analysed on the subject? How then do I form an opinion? As in politics, the temptation to just adopt the assertions of those with a similar world view is strong.
- ✓ **Not everything you need to know fits into 140 characters.** Society today has a short attention span and an unquenched desire to be entertained. Although people want to know whether or not sharks are in dire straits, in most cases they want a 'yes' or 'no' answer, not 'it depends'. The reality is, though, that it does depend on things like the species' life history, its population structure, the behaviour of the fishery, the strength of the regulatory scheme... oops, I've exceeded the Twitter limit already! I understand that scientists need to inform people concisely and without boring them, but I also hope that we can be met halfway. I was scolded in a meeting last year for using my inability to understand something as a reason for not agreeing with it. But it turned out no one but the author understood it either. So, a plea to both sides. To the audience: sometimes the situation *is* complex and will require more than a minute to explain; and to the presenter: be patient, it is your job to inform, not to baffle.

- ✓ **Expertise is so passé.** Back in the old days, facts used to be the domain of professional societies and forums. Now, according to the New York Times '*the experts and agencies involved in producing facts have multiplied, and many are now for hire. If you really want to find an expert willing to endorse a fact, and have sufficient money or political clout behind you, you probably can*'.³ I'm not arguing for a return to an elitist past – as a relatively newly-minted female fisheries scientist I've undoubtedly benefited from the changing of the old guard – but in this era of PR machines wouldn't it be nice if the analysis drove the message rather than the other way around? Or is it true that, as the Brexit campaigner Michael Gove claimed, people 'have had enough of experts'⁴ such that it's not a question of which expert analysis to believe, but rather whether any expert analysis is necessary at all?
- ✓ **If you're not with us, you're against us.** With more and more people seeking information that reinforces their existing views, there is a growing tendency to distrust anyone who disagrees. No one, not even those I deify, holds a monopoly on the truth, which is why, especially in science, open debate must be protected and encouraged. But with the transition to campaign (read: media)-driven shark conservation initiatives, questioning the veracity of the details can be taken as subversion. As the line between science and advocacy blurs, and as scientific advice continues to take a back seat to politics in fisheries management discussions, the value of sticking to the facts is an open question for some. But scientists are the fact-checkers of the shark conservation world, and fact-checking is, thanks to the US election, more popular than ever.⁵

This last point led me to wonder, as the ice began to clink in my glass and I watched the cat get an early start on dismantling the Christmas tree, whether the value of fact-checking amounts to anything more than entertainment. After all, given that the revelations about liberties taken with the facts during the US presidential campaign didn't seem to affect the outcome, do the journalists who broke those stories feel that their work didn't matter? David Fahrenthold of the *Washington Post* who fact-checked some of the biggest stories of the campaign was asked just that recently. He answered: 'It *did* matter. I did my job. The voters did theirs. Now my job goes on... and now I know how to do it.' I think I'll take that as my toast to 2016 and resolution for the new year ahead!⁶

³ http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/24/opinion/campaign-stops/the-age-of-post-truth-politics.html?_r=0

⁴ <https://www.ft.com/content/3be49734-29cb-11e6-83e4-abc22d5d108c>

⁵ <https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/fact-checking-project/finally-fact-checking-is-the-new-black/>

⁶ The views expressed in this article are those of the author and are not necessarily shared by the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission.