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Nova Southeastern website lets you keep track of sharks

By Ken Kaye, Sun Sentinel

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One tiger shark, affectionately known as Harry Lindo, swam an unprecedented 27,000 miles in three years. A couple of others, a tiger and a shortfin mako, dove 3,000 feet deep. Others thrashed through the seas at up to 60 mph, all unusual feats for a fish.

They are among 18 sharks tagged with special satellite-linked devices, allowing marine researchers to monitor their movements. And now you can, too.

Nova Southeastern University's Guy Harvey Research Institute in Hollywood has set up an interactive online site — at nova.edu/ocean/ghri/tracking/ — allowing enthusiasts to follow the fierce fish as they travel around the world.

The site is part of the institute's quest to study shark migration patterns, with the ultimate goal being to protect them, as some are endangered.

"This multi-species shark tracking site provides an eye-opening perspective on the secret pathways and enormous distances that some sharks can cover during their seasonal migrations," said Mahmood Shivji, director of the institute's Save Our Seas Shark Research Center.

NSU announced the site in conjunction with the Discovery Channel's "Shark Week 2013," the popular series that explores various aspects of the sharks, and which started on Sunday.

NSU's Guy Harvey Research Institute began tagging sharks in 2009 to study their migratory patterns and now undertakes expeditions worldwide to study them. The school's marine experts have tagged sharks as far away as New Zealand and Australia and as close as Bimini and Maryland. In addition to tigers and makos, they have tagged oceanic white tip and sand sharks.

"It is important for the public to know that we tag sharks for a research purpose, to understand their migrations, and not for making a web site," said Shivji, a professor at NSU's Oceanographic Center. "The website was created secondarily as a public educational tool."

NSU researchers have found some sharks have seasonal patterns. For instance, tiger sharks tagged in Bermuda headed to the warm waters of the Bahamas and the Caribbean during the winter and then returned to deep waters northeast of Bermuda for the summer.

The site also shows sharks can swim incredibly long distances or just hang out in a particular region. For example, a tiger shark named Jamin has swum almost 13,000 miles in the past three years, from the Bahamas to South Florida to the Panhandle. Yet another tiger, Christina, swam only 1,630 miles in the same time period, hanging out between West Palm Beach and Grand Bahama.

Some sharks have displayed an amazing combination of speed and endurance. A mako named Carol, tagged off New Zealand, traveled to Fiji and back, covering about 10,000 miles in just over 11 months.

The NSU Oceanography Center isn't the only entity that allows you to track sharks. Ocearch, a Cape Cod-based nonprofit organization, uses GPS devices to track Great Whites and shows their movements at sharks-ocearch.verite.com/

Stanford University scientists developed "Shark Net," an app that allows those with iPhones or iPads to follow Great Whites along the California coast. Similarly, the Marine Conservation Science Institute, a nonprofit research organization in California, offers an app called Expedition White Shark.

While it offers no tracking site, Florida Atlantic University has been studying the migrations of blacktip sharks by videoing them from an aircraft as they stream by the thousands close to South Florida's beaches in winter.

NSU's Guy Harvey Research Institute monitors sharks with two kinds of devices. One is a spot tag, which is mounted to the fin of a shark and has an antenna that extends upward. Researchers can track it as long as the battery lasts, typically 10 months to two and half years.

The other is a pop-up tag, usually inserted into the shark's top surface by its dorsal fin. It then collects and stores data on the shark's movements. After a pre-determined amount of time, the tag releases from the shark, floats to the surface and transmits the stored data to a satellite.

Ultimately, the goal of the program is to keep the shark population healthy, said Guy Harvey, the renowned marine artist, scientist and explorer.

"Understanding where these animals migrate to and when they do it is crucial to their conservation," he said.

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Shark tracking sites:

NSU-Guy Harvey Research Institute: nova.edu/ocean/ghri/tracking/

Ocearch: sharks-ocearch.verite.com/

Discovery LIVE SHARK FINDER: dsc.discovery.com/tv-shows/shark-week/live-shark-finder/live-shark-finder.htm

Apps:

Stanford University: Shark Net

Marine Conservation Science Institute: Expedition White Shark