

Shark alert: Hammerhead sculptures beneath South Florida's Blue Heron Bridge turn fear into fun



The beach by the Singer Island, Florida pump house (Photo: From the [webcam at the Palm Beach Lake Worth Inlet](#))

Sharks... Just the mention of the word elicits emotions ranging from fear to excitement to trepidation to intrigue...

They have been in the news many times over the past few weeks. There was a huge buzz surrounding the 40th anniversary of the classic blockbuster movie JAWS, followed by close sightings near the shore line in a number of beach towns, including last weekend in Ocean City, Maryland. Newscasts have also included [reports of some serious injuries](#), with a few beaches even closing down temporarily as sharks came close to the shore as they follow the fish migrations north.

South Florida sightings:

An hour north of our home in Palm Beach County, [reef sharks swam so close to shore two weeks ago](#) that all the beaches in St. Lucie County were closed for the day. It was a huge fright to many vacationing families as this species of shark can grow to ten feet in length.

Check out what all the fuss was about in this 13-second video which shows two reef sharks snuggling close to the water's edge at St. Lucie's Waveland Beach. This video shows just one example of why experts advocate for swimming only at lifeguarded beaches and never going into the surf alone. [Watch here on YouTube.](#)

An underwater paradise near the Blue Heron Bridge:

[Phil Foster Park](#) is a stone's throw from our home on Singer Island, located just north of West Palm Beach on the Lake Worth Lagoon of the Intracoastal Waterway. The park's beach, under the famous Blue Heron Bridge, offers easy access to an artificial reef and snorkel trail. The trail, perched just 200 feet offshore in 6 to 12 feet of water, depending on the tides, attracts divers and snorkelers from all over the world. Since Singer Island has the closest proximity to the Gulf Stream, the result is warm turquoise waters, with great visibility, perfect for divers and snorkelers of all ages.

The local scuba community takes pride that the Blue Heron Bridge was named the [best dive site in the world by PADI's Sport Diver magazine in 2013](#). The vast array of marine life contributed to that designation. You can dive or snorkel amid stingrays, seahorses, octopus, manatees, sea turtles, lobsters, and countless species of fish, just to name a few.



Shark sculptures ready to be submerged off Phil Foster Park (Photo: Palm Beach Post)

Shark sculptures submerged off Phil Foster Park:

One man is trying to take the fear factor away from sharks with his artistic donation to the snorkel trail. Part-time Palm Beach County resident Thomas McDonald, also of Roanoke, Virginia, is an artist, diver, and underwater photographer. He created three concrete hammerhead sharks, each weighing 1500 pounds, and donated them as the first phase of a underwater sculpture park at the snorkeling trail off Phil Foster Park.

I first heard of McDonald's work when I saw a notice about the shark submersion in the Palm Beach Post (photo above). His plan was to incorporate his love of art and the ocean by creating and donating these concrete replica hammerheads.

Intrigued by the generosity of the artist, as well as the good fortune of local divers and vacationing snorkelers, I headed over to Phil Foster Park with my camera last Friday morning to see the shark sculptures being lowered into the water.



Divers, boaters, swimmers, and paddleboarders were out bright and early near the beach at Phil Foster Park to be among the first to see the hammerhead shark sculptures after they were lowered into place on the snorkel trail. (Photo: Patti Murphy Dohn)

Glad that I arrived early, I was able to speak to a number of the people who have vested interests in the future of this area as a lure to the diving community, as well as a new cultural oasis.



*On hand to watching the launch of the new sharks were:
(From left:) Victoria Van Dam of the Cultural Council of Palm Beach County, Wendy Puz, Environmental Analyst for the county's Department of Environmental Resources Management (ERM), and Daniel Bates, ERM deputy director; (Photo: Patti Murphy Dohn)*

The sculptures, affectionately called the McSharks for artist Thomas McDonald, are five feet long and about thirty inches tall. They were lowered into the water by a crane on a barge during high tide on June 19, and placed into position by [Pura Vida Divers](#), a PADI 5-star dive center located nearby on Singer Island.



(Photo: Patti Murphy Dohn)

Start of an underwater sculpture park:

Daniel Bates, deputy director of the county's [Department of Environmental Resources Management](#) (ERM), watched the process with me from the shoreline, along with his colleague Wendy Puz, and camera crews from all the local West Palm Beach TV stations.

Bates shared with me and the television news crews that the sharks are the first pieces in an underwater sculpture garden along that 800-foot snorkel trail. Citing

that there are other underwater sculpture reefs throughout the world, Bates explained that algae and coral will start to grow on these pieces within a few months, then attracting even more marine life. He likened it to an aquarium.



(Photo: Patti Murphy Dohn)

And in turn, more divers will also be attracted to the area, as evidenced by the number who waited to see these sculptures once they were in place. Some families with young children were among the spectators, ready to snorkel over and get their first glimpse of the hammerheads.



(Photo: Patti Murphy Dohn)

Bates noted that the Blue Heron Bridge is a world-renowned location and the Department of Environmental Resources Management wants to keep enhancing it. He praised the vision and generosity of artist Thomas McDonald whose donation was at no cost to the county and local tax payers. As McDonald's plan came to fruition, there was a growing excitement from both the arts community and from local divers.



Always ready to cover the news on the waterfront is South Florida's own James Wieland, @SurfnWeatherman of WPTV.

After conducting interviews, James dove in and hit the snorkeling trail with his underwater camera to take photos and video footage of the three sharks for the evening broadcast. (Photo: Patti Murphy Dohn)



It was so nice to be able to catch up with Baltimore's good friend, [Sandra Shaw](#), formerly of WBAL-TV, who has been part of WPBF's First Alert Weather Team in West Palm Beach for the past five years. Sandra did special features on a number of our Catholic schools when she worked for WBAL.

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As the sharks were submerged, sculptor Thomas McDonald was underwater in full diving gear watching the placement. Afterwards, he swam to shore and spoke to the news crews and spent a few minutes with me.



Thomas McDonald, sculptor of the three hammerheads and inspiration for the underwater sculpture reef (Photo: Patti Murphy Dohn)

Artist Thomas McDonald laughed as he told me that sharks “bring out a reaction in people... some are afraid of them and many people love that fear a little bit.” He was excited to share his hammerheads, which took four months to make, with those who visit the trail at Phil Foster Park. He donated his time and artistry to Palm Beach County in memory of his father who died in May and who inspired his work. Tom explained that seeing his plan finalized at the start of the Fathers Day weekend meant a great deal to him as he remembered his Dad’s legacy.

A diver for the past thirty years, Tom was intrigued by his first visit to the Blue Heron Bridge and fell in love with the marine life there. He told me that is why he chose this location for the donation of his sculptures as it “is a world class dive site.” He added that “the County has been so helpful. I’m grateful for what they have done to make this project a reality today.”



Michael DeLuca, a rising junior at Boca High School, was also happy to be on hand for the submersion of the shark sculptures. He completed his Eagle Scout project there last November, placing two artificial reefs by the snorkel trail.

Michael told me that it “couldn’t be a better location” because of the number of divers and tourists in the area. “The hammerheads bring a cool addition... It’s great that they have been placed along the trail.”

Enjoy these videos of the hammerhead sculptures:

1. Watch this 1-minute [video from the ERM Facebook page](#) to see the hammerhead statues in their new environment by the snorkel trail;
2. This [2-minute video shows local snorkelers](#) with the three shark sculptures, as well as some of the nearby marine life.

Come snorkel with the hammerheads:

Plan a getaway to the West Palm Beach area of South Florida and come snorkel along the trail with the new shark sculptures:

Phil Foster Park is located on the east end of the Blue Heron Bridge (900 Blue Heron Blvd, Riviera Beach, Florida 33404).

The snorkel trail can be accessed by walking under the bridge to the south side of the park, overlooking Peanut Island. The three sharks are straight out, toward the beginning of the trail.

Be sure to email me if you make plans to come for a visit: pattimurphydohn@gmail.com.

For more information:

1. [Plan a visit to Phil Foster Park](#);
2. [Learn about the Phil Foster Snorkel Trail](#);
3. [About Palm Beach County's artificial reef program](#);

For a few other stories on my adventures in Palm Beach County, Florida:

Check out:

1. [My first time at the beach in September: Collecting wisdom from the sea](#);
2. [Amid the swaying palm trees: St. Jude Church in Tequesta, Florida](#);
3. [Witnessing God's wonder: Two sea turtles released in Juno Beach, Florida](#).