

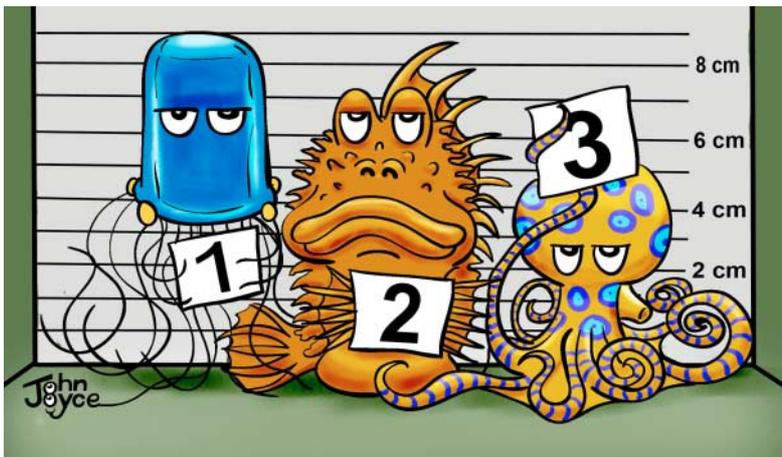
# Aquatic Life



by John Joyce

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## The Unusual Suspects



The Great White Shark is the largest predatory fish in the sea and though it is portrayed as the most dangerous shark, that dubious honour goes to its smaller cousin the Tiger Shark which attacks less human beings than the Great White but causes more human fatalities. Tiger sharks will eat anything - seals, birds, squid, small sharks, dolphins and even old pieces of tyres.

It is worth noting however that the TOTAL number of human deaths in US coastal states caused by shark attack annually is still almost forty times less than those caused by lightning strikes and that only three species of shark - the Great White, Tiger and Bull Shark - have killed more than ten people.

While Great White Sharks have been portrayed in books and films as the most dangerous marine predator, the animal which kills the most people in the sea each year is the humble Box Jellyfish of which the most dangerous is the Australian species *Chironex fleckeri*. This little animal has dozens of tentacles, each up to five metres long and enough toxin to kill around 60 people each in as little as three minutes. Anecdotal evidence suggests that 100 people die every year because of box jellyfish stings, more fatalities than those caused by sharks, crocodiles and stone fish combined. Another small bottom-dwelling animal with a bad reputation is the Blue-ringed Octopus of Australia, which grows to only about 20 cm across but carries enough venom to kill around 30 people and whose bite can kill a human in about five minutes.



Keeping a very low profile is the most venomous fish in the sea - the Stonefish which, because of its incredible ability to mimic part of the seafloor, inflicts injury by accident when barefoot beachcombers step on it and trigger its venomous spines. These produce a sting so painful that victims of Stonefish poisoning have been known to demand that the affected limb be amputated rather than endure the pain. Luckily, the Stonefish itself does not attack human beings and stings are usually the result of a barefoot swimmer stepping on one of these fish by mistake. Stonefish are even consumed as food in some parts of Asia. Their venom is harmless once the fish is heated by cooking and its meat is consumed with ginger in a clear soup, or - for those who like to live on the edge - even raw as sushi or sashimi.

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