



ALL TOO FAMILIAR

Driving may be one of the most dangerous activities we do. So what can a close encounter with a bunch of hungry sharks teach us about staying safe on the roads?

Sliding off the boat and into the crystal-clear water I was in paradise. Descending 25 metres and swimming gently into an underwater rock formation known locally as "Raggies Cave", I saw them, maybe a dozen, cruising lazily round in circles. The spotted ragged-tooth shark – *Carcharias Taurus* to give the proper name, or "raggie" locally – is one of my favourite sharks.

These fine specimens were between two and three-metres long, with a broad, arched back and up to seven rows of gnarly looking teeth. The Aliwal Shoal, just off the coast of Umkomaas, is known throughout the world as one of South Africa's premier destinations for shark lovers. Sneaking in a quick break between working with clients on the East Coast, I was feeling relaxed and happy – and then I felt the teeth break through my skin.

At this point I'm sure some readers will have already concluded that diving with sharks is extremely dangerous and should be totally avoided, but here I was, on the ocean floor, bleeding, with a swarm of sharks buzzing just inches from my head...

I've been diving with sharks for almost 20 years now, getting up close and personal with raggies, zambezis, tigers, great whites and many more. Each dive has always been meticulously planned, and

over the years I've learned more and more about shark behaviour. So what went wrong?

OPEN WIDE, SAY AAAARGHI

As I entered the cave I was well aware of the sharks; counting them all carefully, sizing them up and observing their behavioural traits. I noticed a shoal of brightly coloured fish swirling around beneath the arch; a ray tucked into the sand in the far corner, and a grouper milling around aimlessly.

I checked my depth and air gauges; all fine. I made mental notes of the rock formations, and planned my emergency exit routes. It was the perfect start to a dive, so I settled in with the sharks.

A current began to pull through the arch, but, being fascinated by the sharks, it didn't bother me. Focused on the dangerous predators in front of me, I didn't notice the old potato cod grouper (or "brindle bass") approach, but he'd spotted my white fingers flashing through the current and decided they might just be sardines, or the like, and gave them a chomping.

Back on the boat, I looked at the cuts to my fingers in disbelief. Concentrating on my very familiar and comfortable shark experience, I'd not even given the bass a second thought, and missed an important safety precaution.

In his epic book *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle*

Maintenance, Robert M Pirsig offers: "What makes (the) world so hard to see clearly is not its strangeness, but its usualness. Familiarity can blind you." Had I been too comfortable and familiar?

FROM PERCEPTION TO REALITY

A few days after my underwater encounter, I was delivering safety leadership training for Africa's leading construction company and our group was discussing risk perception. One of the leaders – among the top 100 in the company – remarked: "You dive with sharks, Andrew, so you must not care too much about the risk."

I responded by asking what the biggest risks were in his life. As a manager of multi-billion construction projects, Johannes, as anticipated, started to reel off the hazards of a construction site – "work at height; things falling from above; slips, trips and falls; manual handling ..." – until I stopped him and asked how much time he really spent among these risks.

Admitting that he also spent a fair amount of his time in meetings and managing paperwork, he began to think a bit more. "Maybe driving home," was his next suggestion. I asked him if he felt he was a safe driver. "Absolutely!" he replied with confidence.

I ventured further: "Would you describe yourself as average, above average, very good, or perfect?"

The reply was quick: "Definitely above average." It was time to open the question to the group. Marking out a line on the floor with a series of ten sticky notes, I explained that I wanted the group of leaders to

stand where they thought best represented their driving ability; the sticky notes representing a scale from one (poor) to ten (perfect), with seven being average ability.

Twenty leaders jostled for position: 17 of them scored themselves seven or above, with 14 of these rating themselves eight or nine, and two giving themselves a ten out of ten rating. One leader stood alone at the other end; giving himself a score of three.

"I've had a couple of accidents recently, and I'm a bit of a nervous driver to be honest," he explained. While the laughter and good-natured heckling from his colleagues continued, I walked back to the other end of the line to ask those "perfect" drivers why they were standing there.

"Because I've never had an accident," was the first reply from the smartly dressed executive standing on the number ten sticky note.

"I always arrive at my destination," said the other.

ABSENCE ≠ EXISTENCE

The absence of accidents, however, does not equal the existence of safety. Have you seen the latest Hollywood blockbuster to be based on a real-life event? *Deepwater Horizon* with Mark Wahlberg retells the story of the ill-fated oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico, which claimed the lives of 11 men and seriously injured 17 more, in April 2010.

The story behind the movie – revealed through a series of official independent investigations – shows that on the day the rig exploded senior leaders had helicoptered in to celebrate seven years without an accident on the platform. Just after they departed the celebrations, the pressure in one of the main pipelines was so great it ripped through the rig.

DOES FAMILIARITY BREED CONTEMPT?

In the same weekend that I was swimming with the sharks, seven people died and 20 others were seriously injured on roads in the surrounding KwaZulu-Natal region. Scanning the reports it became apparent that all were local people. Had familiarity blinded them, too? Perhaps: the reports stated that, of the 20 people that lost their lives, not one of them was wearing a seatbelt.

One of the cases hit hard. On the same day that I'd been travelling home from a meeting with a large agricultural foods processor, a man died and his wife was seriously injured when their car rolled across the R614 just outside Tongaat. The emergency services arrived on the scene and, using hydraulic cutting equipment, took apart what remained of the vehicle in order to extract the couple.

The man, not wearing a seatbelt, had died almost immediately "of extensive traumatic injuries", on impacting the steering wheel and front windscreen of his car. Waiting for the medical services to arrive, his wife, also not wearing a seatbelt and now trapped in the car, could do nothing but stare at her dead husband's body. With life-threatening injuries she

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was rushed to hospital. In the meantime, their two children were being cared for by friends and neighbours.

It's not just adults losing lives in vehicles. Around 85 percent of South African children travel unrestrained in cars, and child passenger deaths are now the fourth-leading cause of unnatural deaths in South Africa.

Tests with dummies and investigations of real-life accidents reveal that, even in lower-speed crashes, an unrestrained child is thrown around the inside of the vehicle and, in some cases, ejected out through one of the windows. At 40 km/h the impact on a child's head is the same as dropping the child from a height of six metres.

SOCIAL NORMS AND THE CHALLENGE OF BAD MATHS

Over the last ten years, I've visited this magnificent country twenty times. On each visit I never cease to be amazed at the attitudes to road safety. As I am driven between hotels and work locations I count the number of drivers I see not wearing seatbelts. Those wearing the safety device are very much in the minority.

My drivers (whether arranged by the client, or recently, via Uber) arrive smartly dressed with a clean car and a bright smile. In that split second before we pull away, I check whether they are wearing a belt. If not, a polite request – typically indicating that the driver seems like a nice chap and I don't want him to be hurt while driving me today – normally does the trick, and the driver buckles up immediately without hesitation nor offence.

South African legislation stipulates that everyone in a car should wear a seatbelt and children should be in a proper child safety seat. It's the driver's responsibility to ensure everyone is buckled up. So why don't South Africans wear seatbelts?

Back at our safety leadership training ... with a full 80 percent of the group rating themselves as "above average" in their driving ability, the maths just didn't add up!

It was time for question number two: "Who always wears their seatbelt when driving?" Only two hands were raised. Johannes (the site manager, who had begun the discussion by declaring he was an "above average" safe driver) was not one of them.

Each leader offered their best reasoning for why they didn't feel seatbelts were necessary all of the time, with many suggesting that on familiar roads they were safe without them.

As we broke for coffee, Johannes, now looking pretty low, approached me and looking me square in the eyes said: "I'm an idiot" as he lifted up his cellphone, on the screen was a photo of a very badly smashed up car.

Johannes explained that this was his sister's vehicle. She had been travelling with two friends on KwaZulu-Natal roads at the weekend when they were involved in a terrible accident. The car – a tough-looking station wagon – was written off, but, fortunately, the women inside were okay – but only thanks to their seatbelts.

DRIVING SAFETY FORWARD

There are at least 43 (reported) fatalities every day on South African roads. More simply, that's one every 33 minutes. Research undertaken by the United States Traffic Safety Administration shows that seatbelts reduce the chance of death during a crash by around 53 percent.

Child safety seats reduce the risk of passenger death by 71 percent for infants and 54 percent for toddlers.

Don't be blinded by the familiar. Go well, and buckle up every time. 



Sharman on Safety is based on ideas and concepts from Andrew Sharman's new book: *From Accidents to Zero: a practical guide to improving your workplace safety culture*. Andrew is an international member of the South African Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (SAIOSH) and the Chief Executive of RMS – consultants on leadership and cultural excellence to a wide range of blue-chip corporates and non-government organisations globally. More at www.RMSswitzerland.com. This month SHEQ MANAGEMENT readers can get an incredible 50 percent discount off Andrew's book at: www.fromaccidentstozero.com using the code SHEQSA50 – but only if you place your order in the next 30 days.

From Accidents to Zero

A practical guide to improving your workplace safety culture

Thought-provoking and insightful. From Accidents to Zero progressively pushed me to see new connections, and new ways to address organisations' safety culture and risk management challenges.

Mieke Jacobs, Global Practice Leader – Employee Safety, DuPont

This A to Z of safety represents an eminently practical knowledge toolbox, one filled with tools which will add value to the CEO and the front line Safety Practitioner in equal measures. Relevant, accessible and applicable, this is safety distilled and a 'must-read'.

Steven Brown, Brewery Manager, Heineken

Read more at www.fromaccidentstozero.com

