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NEWS

Shark bite victim lucky with little damage; ready to return to water and sharks



Jim Abernethy, who was admitted into St. Mary's earlier this week, explains to the media where a Caribbean Reef shark had bitten him on the right forearm during a press conference at St. Mary's Medical Center in West Palm Beach on Friday, Jan. 28, 2011. Abernethy said the shark bit him while he was attending the bait crate used to attract sharks during a recent dive. He was in about 10-feet of water when bitten.

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WEST PALM BEACH — As Jim Abernethy walked out of the St. Mary's Medical Center Friday afternoon, he considered himself fortunate. When a reef shark bit the dive-boat operator's arm a couple of days ago, it did not cause significant damage to nerves or arteries.

During an afternoon press conference, he spoke about the shark bite that occurred Wednesday, 18 miles north of West End, Bahamas.

Abernethy, 52, said he was tending to bait about 10 feet below the water's surface when a shark bit him on the right arm. After the bite, crew members immediately tended to the wound as a Coast Guard helicopter was dispatched to scene and flew him to St. Mary's Medical Center.

"Immediately, I was thinking that I don't know how bad it is," Abernethy said. "While I was still pulling off my wet suit, my crew had already wrapped up my arm. I didn't get to see the wound until much later that day at St. Mary's."

Abernethy said he initially thought he had been bitten by a lemon shark, but was later told that it was a reef shark. He said the bite was accidental.

"The truth of the matter is there is no shark on the planet that eats people or attacks people as a food source," he said. "This shark knew immediately that I was the wrong subject, even though I was very close to the bait, and released me. "

Dr. Eugene Misquith, who treated Abernethy upon his arrival at St. Mary's, said the main concerns were gauging the severity of the bite and the potential for infection. Dr. Misquith said that Abernethy did not suffer significant damage to nerves or arteries,

"He was lucky, very lucky," Dr. Misquith said.

Abernethy said he plans to continue his excursions, but will be more cautious in the future in dealing with rough water conditions. "I'm not going to be tending to bait when it's rough," he said.

Despite being bitten, Abernethy said he remained committed to the cause of conserving sharks.

"I've lived at sea for 12 years, doing shark expeditions," said Abernethy, who was released from the hospital Friday. "I think it's my life's work, to save sharks."