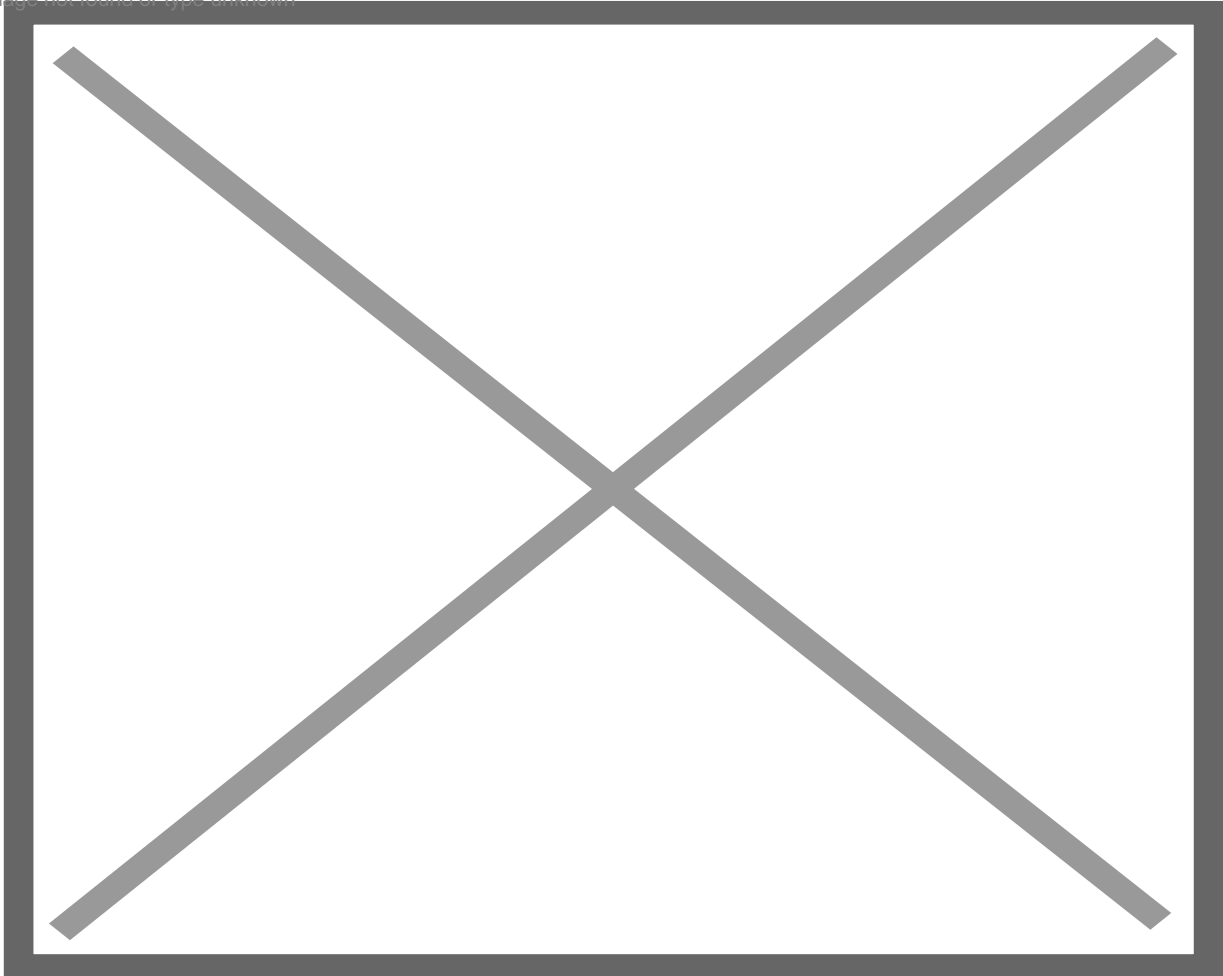


Shark Attack Results in Death of Tourist in St. Martin

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AP — A shark killed a 38-year-old female tourist in the French Caribbean territory of St. Martin on Thursday, shocking many in the eastern Caribbean region where experts say such attacks are extremely rare.

Government spokesman Alain Rioual told The Associated Press that it was the first time in the territory's recent history that a fatal attack had been reported. The victim, a French woman who was on sabbatical in St. Martin, died after having her leg torn off in the attack about 500 feet (150 meters) from shore.

The attack happened in Orient Bay, a popular beach in the northeastern part of the island that St. Martin shares with the Dutch Caribbean territory of St. Maarten. Shortly afterward, the government announced a 48-hour ban on swimming and water sports at all beaches.

There's only been one unprovoked and non-fatal bite reported in St. Martin, and it occurred in 2005, Tyler Bowling, manager of Florida Program for Shark Research, told the AP.

Overall, there have been 34 unprovoked bites in the Caribbean region since 2000, four of which have been fatal, he said.

The most common shark species in the region where Thursday's attack occurred are Caribbean reef sharks and nurse sharks, which don't pose a risk, Mike Heithaus, shark researcher and dean of the College of Arts, Sciences & Education at Florida International University, said in a phone interview. He said tiger sharks and bull sharks occasionally appear as well.

"Most times they're not a threat, but they can be dangerous," he said.

The majority of shark attacks in the Caribbean have occurred in the Bahamas, with two reported last year, one of them fatal. A shark attack also was reported in Cuba in 2019, according to the Florida-based International Shark Attack File.

Program Director Gavin Naylor told the AP that he was surprised about the attack.

"It's pretty unusual in that part of the world," he said.

Naylor added that such attacks are usually tied to mitigating circumstances including spearfishing or chumming, adding that 95% of shark attacks are accidental. He said most attacks in the Caribbean occur in the Bahamas because of its massive tourism.

"We see a very strong correlation between shark bites and the number of people in the water," he said.

The organization reported a total of 64 confirmed unprovoked shark attacks worldwide last year.

Written by AP's Danica Cotto.