THE TRUTH ABOUT SEA MONSTERS

BY HILLARY HAUSER

Some time ago I opened my newspaper and, thumbing through the news, arrived at the theater/entertainment section. Behold! There across the page was a voluptuous, bronzed, bikini-clad woman frolicking in the water on a surfmat with legs, feet and toes hanging down from the surface like lures. And sure enough, there was a huge, monstrous-looking fish with an open mouth full of sharp, pointed fangs heading for the bait. A little blurb explained the action: "Lost River Lake was a thriving resort until they discovered . . ." And then came the bloodcurdling title: *"Piranha!"*

This exploitative cinema was no doubt an attempt to cash in on the left-over blood of *Jaws*. My initial reaction to this announcement of yet another movie about another human-eating sea monster was not too positive. I spend a lot of time swimming and scuba diving in the ocean and I resent the pictorial intrusion in my imagination of big sea beasts that are lurking under me, just waiting to bite my toes — or worse, swallow me whole.

I had hesitated for a long, long time before I saw *Jaws*, just because I didn't want to spoil my ocean swims. But finally, after I'd heard many reports from friends that the picture was a "harmless laugh," I went. I was *so* relieved to find that the reports were fairly accurate, and I actually had a good time leaping out of my seat with everyone else.

Then, *The Deep* came along with its giant moray eel that grabbed divers who came too close to its lair. This film was good for a few scares too. But one important thing about the film was that the gorgeous underwater photography let the audience know that the subsea world *is* beautiful. Hopefully the average viewer intelligently reasoned that man-grabbing moray eels don't exist, and that the probabilities of finding a sunken shipload of morphine vials are slim.

Actually, every one of us is a prime target for Hollywood fantasies, and that's because the human fascination with monsters — particularly sea monsters — has existed practically forever. Sharks represent the ultimate threat since these animals have no natural predators in the sea and are beyond human control. But ocean bathers should be reassured by facts. One fact is that you're more apt to get hit by lightning than be bitten by a shark. And, the shark attacks that have been recorded over the years have taken place primarily in seal rookery areas (for example, off California this includes the Tomales Point area in Marin County, Ano Nuevo Island off the coast of Santa Cruz, the Farallon Islands west of San Francisco, and the west end of San Miguel Island in the Santa Barbara Channel). Quite frequently the shark attack has been on an abalone diver working in areas that are known to be feeding grounds for sharks and killer whales. But even then, an attack is most often a case of mistaken identity: It's been noted that sharks don't like humans and once they realize what they have attacked, they leave. If a diver stays out of sea lion areas, he or she will probably never see a shark. Most divers have *never* seen a shark, period.

And moray eels? They're *afraid* of humans! If some hand reaches into its mouth, then it's a good bet that the animal will chomp down. As ridiculous as that may sound, an unwary diver might do such a thing while reaching around blindly in a hole for a lobster. Divers usually don't do this, if they're smart anyway. And, the reason you see morays "flashing their teeth" all the time (and looking dangerous because of it) is because they open and close their mouths to breathe.

The funny thing is this: The harmlessness of most sea creatures is a surprisingly recent discovery. For centuries people thought the sea was full of man-gobblers, and only with the development of scuba diving equipment did this idea change. When humans were provided with a window to the sea, in the 1940's, we found a world of beautiful creatures instead of those big, horrible monsters.

Some of the early thinking on this subject is right there in black and white, in many of the early books on the ocean. Even in the more scientifically oriented books there are wild imaginations let loose. I have a book entitled *The Sea and Its Wonders*, published in London in the year 1902, and its overall theme is that almost all of the animals and plants in the sea are capable of harming man and other living things, and they will do so without a moment's notice. All through this particular book are wood-cut illustrations of sea animals tangling with men or other animals. There are portrayals of a swordfish attacking a whale, a cuttlefish attacking a diver, frigate birds attacking a gull, an albatross attacking a sailor, and even polar bears attacking a boat.

The idea that the sea is a hostile place is a reflection of an age-old attitude that lurks in the background of modern day feelings about the ocean. Hollywood can't be blamed for capitalizing on these deep-rooted jitters, which it has been doing for a long, long time.

In Westways magazine (Aug. '78), film reviewer Arthur Knight wrote this about *Jaws II:* "The film is rooted in man's basic fear of anything he can't see, understand or control." Along this line of thinking we should understand that the sea is not the only subject of this "basic fear." There is always outer space. In fact, box office activity in recent years would indicate that the subject of Martians and other creatures from extraterrestrial realms has enjoyed a surge of interest on the part of movie-goers. The clever cartoonist Russell Myers summed the whole thing up the best in the comic strip Broom Hilda: One of his beaked characters is saying to Broom Hilda, "I'm going to produce a movie! I shall skillfully combine the elements necessary to make the number one all-time grosser!" "What's it called?" asks the cigar-chewing witch. The answer? *"Close Encounters with a Huge Shark from Outer Space!"*

If movie-goers can simply enjoy their good scare, have fun thinking about things beyond their control, whether in the ocean or in outer space, that's okay. Most people seem to be able to distinguish fantasy from reality, which is important in the area of the sea where we *do* have some idea of what is going on. The Diving Equipment Manufacturers Association (DEMA) has reported that business has never been better—if that's any indication of public attitude. I personally hope it's a sign that most folks aren't negatively influenced and unnecessarily frightened by sharks, moray eels or imaginary sea monsters. Let's get out of the theater and back into the water.