Ultimate predator

No other creature in the world captivates our imagination like the great white shark. Its unmistakable power, both awesome and terrifying, plays on humankind’s most primitive fears. It is the master of the oceans, a perfectly designed killing machine with one clear purpose: eat or perish. Carcharadon carcharias is found along the coastal waters of major oceans and is the world’s largest known fish, with some even reaching lengths of six metres and weighing close to two tons. In South Africa, the densest concentration of great whites in the world prowl in an area known as Shark Alley, between Dyer Island and Geyser Rock off the coast of Gansbaai. The sharks congregate here due to the massive Cape fur seal colony on Geyser Rock, a staple of their diet.

Besides seals, great whites also feed on fish, smaller sharks, rays, turtles and the occasional whale carcass. Great whites typically use an ambush technique when hunting, attacking their prey from underneath. The sharks gain such momentum that they make spectacular breaches, much like whales, during these attacks, with the helpless victim sometimes flung into the air. Great whites are also known to bite prey once and then back off, waiting for the prey to die before feeding.

“Maneater” According to research, great whites use their teeth in much the same way that we use our fingers. They are known to test-bite prey as well as unfamiliar objects such as buoys and other flotsam in order to identify it as a suitable meal. Researchers believe it is this behaviour that leads to attacks on humans. Great whites, however, seem to dislike humans as prey. Researchers hypothesize that a shark’s digestion is too slow to deal with a human’s high ratio of bone to muscle and fat. However, a test-bite from a great white has proved fatal in many instances, since the bite alone can cause massive blood loss and internal damage. Thankfully shark attacks are rare and there are ways of avoiding encounters with sharks.Vulnerable Despite its fearsome appearance, great whites, as well as many other sharks, are listed as vulnerable by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Nature Resources (IUCN). Great whites are hunted for their jaws, teeth and fins. Since they are apex predators ie are at the top of the marine food chain, they are very sensitive to any changes in the marine environment due to human and any other activity.Today, the reputation of great whites is undergoing a major revamp. Research and tourism such as shark cage diving has placed the plight of the great whites in the spotlight. By admiring these magnificent animals in their natural environment and appreciating the sensitivity of marine (for that matter any) ecosystem, we can help protect great whites for future generations. Information adapted from www.wikipedia.org and thanks to Sharklady Adventures for images