

SHARK SCIENTIST EDUCATES AND ENTERTAINS ACI AUDIENCE IN KEYNOTE ADDRESS

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In a 2022 article headlined in Smithsonian Magazine, "Discovery Channel's 'Shark Week' Is Packed with Misinformation and Junk Science," Dr. David Shiffman and his team use scientific methodology to support this headline and the sub headline, "Scientists watched 202 episodes and found them filled with unreliable information and white male experts named Mike."

Focusing on good and bad strategies to use in conservation communications, and specifically in communicating about sharks, Shiffman enthralled attendees at the 2025 ACI Conference in Atlantic City, with a colorful, engaging PowerPoint presentation, humor, insights, and audience engagement, developed from decades of working in ocean conservation and consulting, including communications.

"I'll introduce you to some of the science and conservation behind the problem that I'm trying to solve. Also, some of the strategies that I found work, and some of the strategies that I found absolutely do not work when trying to persuade people that we should conserve and protect a group of animals that many people not only fear, but even hate," Shiffman began.

He describes himself as an interdisciplinary conservation biologist and in this role, he's spoken to thousands of people all over the world, including journalists, environmental advocates, students, scuba divers, fishers, and conservation communicators.

Shiffman encourages scientists to get out of their ivory towers. "To put it mildly, he said, it is important that we break out of the ivory tower because I think recent events have shown that it matters what people think about science. It matters that everyone appreciates the role and value of science, and that requires experts engaging with the public."

"The problem that I'm trying to solve is that sharks, despite being ecologically important animals are highly threatened. They're in fact, one of the most threatened groups of vertebrate animals in the world. Frogs are worse off because of a fungal disease," he explained.

He pointed out that sharks are very much in the public consciousness, "When I tell some people, a third of all known species of sharks, (536 known species) are threatened with extinction, they say good. How can we get 100% threatened with extinction?"

Shiffman says large scale, informed, and targeted public engagement is needed and is the multifaceted conservation challenge that scientists and communicators face.

When communicating the plight of sharks to skeptical audiences, “I often have to break down people’s misunderstandings, before I can build back up how to get them to care. When I say there’s a lot of nonsense in this space, *Shark Week* is a big part of that.”

He projected a Vox article with the headline, “Watch as Shark Week slowly drives this scientist insane.” He told the ACI audience, “It’s a dumpster fire of lies and nonsense.” Using media content and discourse analysis, undergraduate volunteers watched all episodes, 202 hours aired over 32 years, and revealed some striking statistics. One, that some media reported, was that the series featured more men than women and more guys named Mike. “My field is two-thirds women. You would not know that from watching *Shark Week*.”

Shiffman has particular caution for the “popularization” of sharks and the people and organizations who continue to depict the animals as man killers and something to be afraid of. “So, a big problem I face, other than some people who don’t want to help sharks at all, is increasingly people who do want to help sharks in the ocean. They’re inspired to act, they care about endangered species, but they misunderstand what the problems are, and they misunderstand what the solutions are, and that does not help.”

Conduct an Internet search and many of the top hits include “conservationists” who kiss sharks or stand on the top of Humpback whale carcasses for a photo op in the name of saving a species. Shiffman said, “When people are criticized for this, they say, well I’m just raising awareness. No, you’re not. You’re lying to people and that’s not the same thing. Raising awareness is a vital step in conservation advocacy, raising awareness of wrong information does not help anyone or anything.”

When doing presentations or communicating, “I try to persuade people (often with humor) that we need to protect sharks, and they are not a threat to you and your safety. Some people are so afraid of sharks they’re afraid to go into a pool or a lake. If you’ve ever been in the ocean there was a shark not far from you. It knew you were there, and it left you alone, and you had a pretty pleasant day at the beach”

He says public policy and communicating it, needs to keep in mind the relative risks. “More people in a typical year are killed by flowerpots falling on their heads. More people are bitten by other people on the New York Subway system each year than are bitten by sharks in the whole world.” As a social media guy, he says he loves this one. “More people died falling off cliffs while trying to take selfies of the scenery behind them than are killed by sharks.”

This renowned researcher and author (*Why Sharks Matter*) wants people to know that sharks are actively, ecologically and economically good. They provide structure for coastal food webs that billions of people rely on for food and hundreds of thousands of people depend on for jobs.

He wants conservation communicators to know some of the tools and strategies we can use to combat misinformation, fear, and inaccuracies.

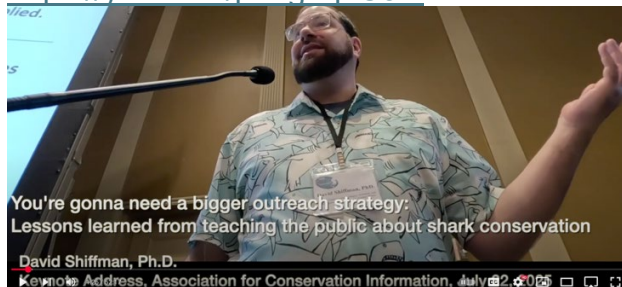
- Facts matter, but alone do not win
- Create strategic communications plans with specific goals
- Know your take home messages
- Identify your audiences and reach them and treat them with respect
- Use all tools and platforms at your disposal for messaging
- Create fun and educational outreach events

He participated in numerous “Two Scientists Walk into a Bar” events that were wildly popular, plus his bar tab was paid. During the COVID pandemic he did online presentations for schools in all 50 states. “We can reach a lot of people, even if each of us only reach a few,” Shiffman said.

Shiffman wants everyone to know it is not too late to save sharks. Proven policy solutions exist. “We know they work. We know when to implement them. We know what we need to make them work.”

Watch the 2025 ACI Keynote Address by Dr. David Shiffman in its entirety here:

<https://youtu.be/p1LgnqcC3lo>



Peer Reviewed *Shark Week* research paper:

<https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0256842>

Follow Dr. Shiffman on social media @WhySharksMatter