



Society for Conservation Biology

A global community of conservation professionals

24th September, 2014

David M. Zaslav, CEO,
One Discovery Place
Silver Spring, MD 20910

Re: Shark Week

Dear Mr. Zaslav,

On behalf of the Marine Section of the Society for Conservation Biology (SCB), I write to express concern over the quality and accuracy of programming contained in Discovery Channel's *Shark Week* over the last few years. *Shark Week* began as a celebration of sharks and a way for viewers to become more familiar with these misrepresented and misunderstood species. However, it has evolved into a sensationalist event that now predominantly preys on the fears and misconceptions held by the public, rather than belying them.

We are particularly concerned regarding your recent tendency to actually provide false information to the public, and to portray NOAA and several independent marine biologists as conspirators in illicit government cover-ups. We are referring to the *Megalodon* series here, although note a similar portrayal outside *Shark Week* on another Discovery Communications channel, Animal Planet, in the *Mermaids* fakumentary. Such programming actively fosters a troubling distrust towards real scientists and government science agencies. It has also resulted in greater public misunderstanding of science on a large scale: many of our members are educators and have been forced to answer student questions about whether the megalodon is actually extinct because of the show.

Another major concern is the promotion of wildlife harassment through the program *Zombie Sharks*. Again, this paints scientists in an unfavorable light as this program purported to be representing research. However, all of the "research questions" were answered by real scientists years, or even decades ago. We are also troubled by the fact that producers of *Monster Hammerhead* and last year's *Voodoo Sharks* actually lied to scientists about what the specials were actually going to be about to secure their participation.

We would also like to take the opportunity to support the criticism of the South African National Sea Rescue Institute (NSRI) of this years' *Shark of Darkness: Wrath of Submarine* fakumentary (independent of the *Megalodon* series), which unapologetically and obscenely exploited a real-life tragedy for the purpose of 'entertainment.' This not only (and rightly so) upset the family and friends of the victims, but also promoted mistrust of the NSRI, which exists primarily to save the lives of people at sea.



We understand that some *Shark Week* programming is intended as entertainment rather than educational material. However, shows like *Sharknado* demonstrate that it is possible to achieve this in clearly labeled fiction without lying to the public and undermining real shark science and conservation. *Sharknado* producers have even contributed some of their proceeds to ongoing shark research and conservation efforts.

There is a lot of high quality science programming that has garnered huge audiences, such as *Planet Earth*, *Blue Planet*, *Life*, and even *Shark Week* of years gone by. With regard to the case in point, there remain many engaging and interesting real-life science, natural history and conservation stories that Discovery could tell about sharks without relying on sensationalism, pseudoscience or fear mongering. The popularity of the *Alien Sharks* series demonstrates this. However we, as a Society that promotes the better incorporation of scientific information into good conservation practice, cannot strongly enough admonish the production of unnecessary misinformation by Discovery Channel. Such actions are helping to generate a public mistrust of real scientists, which has serious implications for real world efforts to conserve populations of sharks and other species.

Sincerely,

John A. Cigliano, PhD,
President, Marine Section, Society for Conservation Biology