

A Food Thief

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Dr. William V. Raszka, MD, Editorial Board Member, Pediatrics

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I recently visited the South Carolina coast. While I had expected warm sun and a bit of time lounging on the sand, a tropical storm rolled through the area at the same time I visited. One unexpected consequence was that I had the opportunity to walk the beach during a rainstorm. Much to my surprise, while walking I saw a giant sea turtle just at the shoreline.

I did not know what type of sea turtle it was but I was impressed by its tremendous size. I did not want to bother the turtle so I kept my distance. Unfortunately, the only other walkers on the beach also spotted the turtle and approached it. The young girls asked me if they could approach the turtle. Before I could reply, they ran shrieking, towards the turtle hoping to touch it. While turtles are generally not aggressive, [as reported in *The Wall Street Journal*](#), they are often the most dangerous marine animals in aquariums.

While visitors to aquariums often come to admire the sharks and wonder if the sharks will bite divers or fish in the aquarium, they are generally quite well fed and are rarely aggressive. The sea turtles however, like to steal food from the other aquarium residents, including the food intended for the sharks. One would expect that stealing food from a shark would be dicey business but the turtles may weigh 500 pounds, are encased in a very hard shell, and have powerful and very sharp beaks.

They generally get what they want. Divers who work in aquariums are much more careful around the turtles than the sharks. Many have reported being pinned against the side of the aquarium walls or having the backsides nipped by sea turtles. How to keep the turtles from stealing the shark's food and preventing any mayhem inside the aquarium is not easy. Some aquariums now coax the turtles into separate pools while the sharks feed. Others have developed heavy cages that surround the food intended for the turtles. The food in the cage sinks to the bottom of the tank. So while the turtles are busy eating the food anchored to the bottom, the sharks can feed higher up in the aquarium.

Fortunately, the beach is quite different from an aquarium. The girls did not hear me when I tried to tell them that it was best to leave all wild animals alone. As it turned out, the turtle simply turned around and walked back into the surf and disappeared into the water as the girls approached.

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