

There has been long-standing global concern for shark and ray populations under pressure from consumer demand for their fins, meat, skin and liver oil. Historically, fisheries involving these species have taken place in the absence of even basic management. In 2014, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Shark Specialist Group produced a report assessing the conservation status of over 1000 shark and ray species, the main findings of which are that: 1) there is a severe lack of data on sharks and rays, with no information for nearly half of all the species assessed; 2) almost a quarter of all sharks and rays are threatened with extinction; and 3) overfishing and habitat loss are the biggest threats to these species. The study demonstrates that management of fisheries and trade is urgently needed to avoid extinctions and to promote population recovery.

EDITORIAL

There is growing acceptance at the international level that management of shark and ray fisheries is critical if further overexploitation of these resources is to be curtailed. Broad, but non-binding commitments have been made by States to resolve the issue, however, many governments lack the resources, expertise, and political will necessary to conserve effectively the vast majority of shark and rays. As a result, many of these species have continued to decline.

However, recent years and months have seen a growing commitment by States to start managing their shark and ray resources responsibly and to put in place a package of measures that will help to ensure that products are traceable, sustainable and legal.

One of the most groundbreaking developments in this regard took place in September 2014, when five species of sharks and two manta ray species received protection under CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) following the decision by Parties in March 2013 to include these species in CITES Appendix II. Formal measures to regulate international trade have now come into effect for Scalloped Hammerhead Shark *Sphyrna lewini*, Great Hammerhead Shark *S. mokarran*, Smooth Hammerhead Shark *S. zygaena*, Oceanic Whitetip Shark *Carcharinus longimanus*, Porbeagle Shark *Lamna nasus* and manta rays *Manta* spp. The challenge is to ensure effective implementation of these listings. All the sharks except Porbeagle Shark are caught for their fins, which are exported to East Asia, especially Hong Kong, where they are the key ingredient in shark-fin soup—an expensive, but popular delicacy. The Porbeagle Shark is mainly caught for consumption of its meat within the European Union, while the gill plates of manta rays are highly valued as a health tonic in southern China.

As a result of these listings, commercial trade in these species must now be strictly regulated and specimens only taken from national and international waters and exported when the fishing/exporting country certifies that they were legally sourced and that the overall level of exports does not threaten the survival of the species. There are technical issues to resolve, such as species product identification and determining when harvest is from sustainable sources, among others, but the growing engagement across the world by States, regional organizations, the non-governmental sector and industry to improve capacity on managing

fisheries is encouraging. Governments are starting to take responsibility by introducing and improving shark management, including support for CITES-listings, and in some cases, banning shark catch. Certain shipping and airline companies have introduced restrictions on the carriage of shark products, some retail outlets are limiting or have banned the sale of shark fin products, and shark-fin soup, often a popular dish at wedding banquets in East Asia, has been removed from the menu of certain hotel chains. Sections of the fishing industry are also joining the push for sustainable, legal and traceable products.

Recently, TRAFFIC and WWF spearheaded a new initiative *Sharks: Restoring the Balance*, which is focused on the protection and sustainable use of sharks and rays. This initiative seeks to build a future where these species can thrive around our

coasts and in the high seas, contributing to the ecosystem and to a healthy culture and economy. This joint strategy is focused on reducing demand, improving management and generating broader support for the conservation and responsible use of sharks and rays.

As part of this work, the Pacific Shark Heritage Programme aims to work with governments throughout the Pacific region to assist them in managing their shark and ray populations sustainably, while safeguarding the cultural heritage of the Pacific Island nations.

The past 20 years has seen increasing recognition of the need to manage sharks and rays. Provision can now be made for trade-related management controls such as CITES to be put in place for a range of vulnerable species. Furthermore, broader responsibility is being taken by stakeholders to establish the provenance of the products they are carrying and selling. Such increasing awareness and concrete action represents a valuable start on the road to sustainability. However, without greater political will from some major fishing nations that have a long history of blocking action to manage shark and ray fisheries at sustainable levels, all the good work by other governments will be undermined and depletion of these resources will continue. It is crucial, therefore, that commitment is enshrined in binding measures by governments and regional organizations responsible for managing fisheries. Greater partnership and collaboration is needed between industry, government and non-governmental organizations to ensure that products are from sustainable and legal sources.

The greatest challenge, however, lies with us, the consumers. There cannot be any long-term solution unless there is responsible consumption. We must take greater care in the choices we make and recognize that each of us has the power to influence consumer demand. It is imperative that we therefore become more discerning in our choices and educate ourselves about what we eat, and challenge suppliers, carriers and other stakeholders, exhorting them to reject marine species that have been caught illegally or from unsustainable sources. The future of the world's oceans depends on it.



Glenn Sant, Fisheries Trade Programme Leader, TRAFFIC
E-mail: glenn.sant@traffic.org