

Saving Sharks

Protection Roadmap

Plan Proposed for Sharks, Rays

You might not want to meet a chondrichthyan fish face-to-face in the water, but their disappearance from the oceans would be a calamitous event.

Chondrichthyes is a taxonomical class that includes sharks, rays, skates, and sawfish, known collectively as the cartilaginous fishes. (Think: Jaws, stingrays, and fish with weaponized noses.) These are often apex predators quite capable of fending for themselves in their natural environment, but which are as good as defenseless against the onslaught of industrialized fishing. 100 million sharks are being killed yearly, and nearly one quarter of species now face extinction.

It's a cruel irony that creatures known to terrorize beachgoers are themselves being threatened, but these are species in serious need of help. Which is why a partnership of NGOs, composed of Shark Advocates International, the Shark Trust, TRAFFIC, Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), and World Wildlife Fund (WWF) International announced their 10-year global strategy for preserving sharks and rays (titled Global Priorities for Conserving Sharks and Rays: A 2015-2025 Strategy) (www.wcs.org/global-priorities-for-conserving-sharks-and-rays) on February 15th.

Dr. Andy Cornish, Global Shark Programme Leader for WWF Hong Kong, said in regards to the announcement: "The significant thing is that lots of different groups have been working on different aspects of conservation." From out of the facts and figures in the report, however, one detail stands out as a rallying point: tackling the consumption of unsustainable shark fin.

Hong Kong remains the largest trading hub for shark fin in the world, with imports pouring in from more than 100 countries. "The tradition of eating shark fin soup originated in this part of China," explained Dr. Cornish. And although China is not the world's top consumer of shark meat (that dubious distinction goes to Brazil), sharks in the waters around China have been, in Dr. Cornish's words, "absolutely exterminated" for their fins and meat. Which explains the need to import. Regrettably, however, Dr. Cornish reported that all of the shark fin sold in Hong Kong is unsustainable or untraceable.

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But as bad as it is for sharks, it's only worse for rays and skates, who rarely get the attention given their more popular (even movie-worthy) relatives. This was a major second point of the report: bringing attention to the plight of rays and skates. Said Dr. Cornish, "At the end of the day, we have to reduce the mortality of these species. There are some species that have been reduced 99%. I'm not making that number up."

The plan put forth by the NGO groups includes a four-point strategy to address consumption (i.e., reducing demand for unsustainable shark and ray products), fisheries management (in Dr. Cornish's opinion "probably the single most important thing is making fisheries sustainable"), species protection (says Dr. Cornish, his voice rising with emotion: "We must not let any species go extinct!"), and trade (since much of the meat is imported between nations). This is a rational, science-based plan to rebuild shark populations while simultaneously allowing sustainable fishing.

"The overall objective of this plan," explained Cornish, "is to halt the decline of these species. We need to be doing so much more – more of the same kind of thing – in so many countries if we're serious about protecting these species."

Most countries have basic regulations under which "a handful of species" are protected. However, these regulations often overlook specific target areas of protection and furthermore may not keep up-to-date with the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, considered the world's go-to list of species in need of protection. (Although the well-known CITES convention targets sustainable trade, it only lists 17 species of sharks and rays as endangered, whereas the IUCN Red List contains 181.)

The good news is that there has been an international trend toward support of shark protection. According to a WWF Singapore poll, for example, three quarters of survey respondents believe their government should do more to protect sharks, and 82% would be willing to forego shark fin soup at a formal dinner.

That said, the continued existence of these species requires specific and enforced management of the species on the part of world governments. As Dr. Cornish concluded: "If we're not serious about managing sharks and rays, they will be overfished."

And this would be a sad end to a creature with 400 million years of evolutionary history: to disappear in endless bowls of unwanted soup.