



The once-abundant sawfish is now rare in the wild.

SAWFISH IN PERIL

The scariest thing about sawfish isn't their appearance

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Though the sawfish looks intimidating with its long, sawlike snout (the rostrum) and sharklike body shape and size — which can reach lengths of up to 24 feet — its physical attributes are far from the scariest fact about the species.

More worrisome for the sawfish family is an unknown future: Once abundant, today it teeters on the brink of extinction. Technically sharklike rays, each of the seven sawfish species is classified as critically endangered on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species, signifying that the agency's Shark Specialist Group believes sawfish face a high risk of extinction in the wild.

Sawfish suffer as bycatch in trawls, as well as from destruction of their habitat. Their tooth-studded rostra are easily entangled in fishing gear, and fishermen often cut off the "saws" to remove the animals from their nets. And while sawfish are now too rare to target, their fins are among the most valuable for shark-fin soup. Like other rays and sharks, sawfish are slow-growing and produce relatively few young, leaving them especially vulnerable to overexploitation and slow to recover from depletion.

Thanks to a determination by the U.S. government, all but one species of sawfish were listed under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species Appendix I in 2007, essentially amounting to a ban on commercial, international trade. Given the dire conservation status of all sawfish, IUCN's SSG is spearheading the creation of a global sawfish-conservation strategy.

"Sawfish are among the most endangered fish in the world, and concerned citizens are key to their survival," says Sonja Fordham, president of Shark Advocates International and a leading proponent of sawfish initiatives. "Each and every sighting of these rare animals is of great interest, while each and every voice in support of sawfish conservation brings promise for bringing them back from the brink."

If you're in the U.S. and you see a sawfish, report it to sawfish@flmnh.ufl.edu so it can be added to the National Sawfish Encounter Database. If you see a sawfish (live or dead) outside the U.S., consider reporting it to the IUCN SSG (iucnshark@gmail.com).

Projectaware.org features updates and the Project AWARE CITES petition.