



PRESS RELEASE

124 Important Shark and Ray Areas Identified Across the European Atlantic

Major step forward for threatened species conservation in Northern Europe.

Dubai, United Arab Emirates. September 22, 2025. Sharks and rays are among the most threatened marine species in European waters, with iconic species such as the Basking Shark (*Cetorhinus maximus*), Tope (*Galeorhinus galeus*), Spiny Dogfish (*Squalus acanthias*), Sicklefin Devil Ray (*Mobula tarapacana*), and Angelshark (*Squatina squatina*) facing steep population declines. Across the North Sea, Celtic Sea, and Bay of Biscay especially, decades of overfishing, habitat degradation, and often limited management have left many populations at historically low levels.

In response to these challenges, the Important Shark and Ray Areas (ISRA) project convened its ninth regional workshop in Den Haag, the Netherlands, from 17-21 May 2025. Over five days, over 180 preliminary Areas of Interest proposals submitted by 214 experts working across northern Europe and Macaronesia, using the latest scientific data on life-history, reproduction, migration, and feeding patterns. After careful evaluation and independent review, 124 ISRAs, 30 Areas of Interest, and 5 candidate ISRAs were identified, ranging from shallow coastal reproductive areas to deep offshore aggregation or feeding sites. All results are now freely accessible on the ISRA e-Atlas (www.sharkrayareas.org).

“These areas are not just points on a map,” said Dr. Rima Jabado, Deputy Chair of the IUCN Species Survival Commission (SSC) and Chair of the IUCN SSC Shark Specialist Group. “Populations of sharks and rays have been declining in European waters for decades, but this work finally gives us a roadmap for action. By identifying these critical habitats, we now know exactly where efforts must be focused if we want species like the Angelshark and Tope to recover. ISRAs give us the chance to change the story from one of decline to one of hope.”

The ISRA process is an evidence-driven, independent initiative designed to identify discrete, three-dimensional portions of habitats that are critical to sharks, rays, and chimaeras. While ISRAs are not protected areas themselves, they provide a robust foundation for marine spatial planning, environmental impact assessments, fisheries management, and cross-border conservation planning. By highlighting where species aggregate, breed, feed, or migrate, ISRAs guide governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and researchers in prioritizing sites for protection, monitoring, and sustainable fisheries management.

“Basking Shark and Spiny Dogfish don’t stop at borders. To protect them, countries across Europe need to work together. ISRAs provide us with a shared evidence base that can guide conservation strategies across the entire region while also highlighting significant gaps in knowledge and protection,” said Dr Sophy Phillips, Principal Fisheries Scientist at Cefas in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and Regional co-Vice Chair for the IUCN SSC Shark Specialist Group Northern Europe region.

Many areas remain under-studied, and data for key habitats are limited. Identifying ISRAs helps direct future research efforts, including targeted surveys and tracking studies, while providing a clear framework for monitoring the effectiveness of conservation actions over time.

“These results clearly show where Europe’s threatened sharks and rays need urgent protection. But maps alone won’t save species. Governments must act now to ensure these areas are safeguarded through strong marine protection and sustainable fisheries management,” added Heike Zidowitz of

WWF Germany and Regional co-Vice Chair for the IUCN SSC Shark Specialist Group Northern Europe region.

The outcomes of the Den Haag workshop provide multiple avenues for regional collaboration. ISRAs can be integrated into transboundary fisheries management, inform the design of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) or Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measures (OECMs), and contribute toward meeting global biodiversity targets such as the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework 30x30 goal to protect 30% of oceans by 2030. By providing a shared evidence base, ISRAs help ensure that conservation measures are coordinated across jurisdictions, maximizing their effectiveness for migratory and widely distributed species.

Looking forward, the European Atlantic ISRAs will serve as a critical tool for policymakers, researchers, and NGOs, guiding spatial planning, informing sustainable fisheries, and supporting conservation initiatives at national, regional, and international levels. The ISRA project will continue to update and expand its database, incorporating new regional knowledge, with the goal of ensuring Europe's and the world's sharks, rays, and chimaeras not only survive but recover in the decades to come.

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Summary

Press Release: 124 Critical Shark and Ray Habitats Identified Across the European Atlantic

Dubai, September 22, 2025. A landmark scientific workshop has identified 124 Important Shark and Ray Areas (ISRAs) across the European Atlantic, providing the first comprehensive map of critical habitats for threatened species such as Basking Shark, Tope, Spiny Dogfish, Sicklefin Devil Ray, and Angelshark.

Held in Den Haag, the ninth regional ISRA workshop coordinated input from 214 experts and contributors from across Northern and Western Europe. In addition to the 124 ISRAs, experts delineated 30 Areas of Interest and 5 candidate ISRAs, covering everything from shallow reproductive areas to deep offshore habitats vital for reproduction, feeding, and migration.

“These results finally give us a roadmap for action,” said Dr. Rima Jabado, Deputy Chair of the IUCN Species Survival Commission (SSC) and Chair of the IUCN SSC Shark Specialist Group. “If we want species like the Angelshark to recover, we must focus conservation where it matters most.”

The ISRA initiative provides governments, fisheries managers, and conservation groups with robust, evidence-based information to guide protection efforts. While ISRAs are not protected areas themselves, they are designed to support marine spatial planning, fisheries management, and environmental impact assessments.

The findings come at a critical time, as European nations move to meet the 30x30 biodiversity target to protect 30% of the ocean by 2030.

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ORGANIZATIONAL INFORMATION

Important Shark and Ray Areas project - www.sharkrayareas.org

The Important Shark and Ray Areas (ISRAs) is an initiative led by the IUCN SSC Shark Specialist Group. ISRAs are “discrete, three-dimensional portions of habitat, important for one or more shark, ray, and chimaera species, that are delineated and have the potential to be managed for conservation”. The identification of ISRAs is an evidence-driven, purely biocentric process based on

the application of scientific criteria supported by the best available science. Any relevant management implication can only be subsequent to, and detached from, the ISRA identification process. The ISRA Criteria have been designed to capture important aspects of shark biology, ecology, and population structure and to encompass multiple aspects of species vulnerability, distribution, abundance, and key life cycle activities, as well as areas of high diversity. The ISRAs' main purpose is to attract the attention of policy- and decision-makers on the need of maintaining the favourable conservation status of sharks, rays, and chimaeras in specific areas through the implementation of the most appropriate management measures, and this can include a protected area designation.

IUCN Species Survival Commission Shark Specialist Group - www.iucnssg.org

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) is the world's largest global environmental network composed of both government and civil society organizations. It is a membership union with more than 1,400 member organizations and over 17,000 volunteer scientists in more than 160 countries. This diversity and vast expertise makes IUCN the global authority on the status of the natural world and the measures needed to safeguard it.

The Species Survival Commission (SSC) is a science-based network of over 9,000 experts from almost every country of the world, all working towards achieving the vision of: 'A just world that values and conserves nature through positive action to reduce the loss of diversity of life on earth'.

The IUCN SSC Shark Specialist Group (SSG) was established by the SSC in 1991 in response to growing awareness and concern of the severe impact of fisheries on shark, ray, and chimaera populations around the world. It is a global network of experts in the biology, taxonomy, use, and conservation of sharks, rays, and chimaeras. The SSG currently has more than 230 members from 82 countries collaborating to assess the status of all known species, collate knowledge, highlight species at risk, develop conservation plans, inform policy, and advise policy-makers on effective, science-based policies for sustainable use, and long-term conservation.

For media queries, contact:

Dr. Rima Jabado - rimajabado@hotmail.com

Heike Zidowitz - Heike.zidowitz@wwf.de

Dr. Sophy McCully Phillips - sophy.phillips@cefias.gov.uk