

## PRESS RELEASE

### **Critical Habitats for Sharks and Rays Identified Across South America's Atlantic and Inland Waters**

Results of five-day workshop on Important Shark and Ray Areas final with 102 areas identified across the region.

**Dubai, United Arab Emirates. May 6, 2025.** A recent global assessment using the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species revealed that more than one-third of sharks, rays, and chimaeras are at high risk of extinction. South American waters—both marine and freshwater—are home to an incredibly diverse array of these species, many of which face growing pressures from overfishing, habitat degradation, and limited management measures.

To support conservation efforts and strengthen protection for these charismatic animals, the Important Shark and Ray Areas (ISRA) project held a regional workshop from 13 to 17 January 2025 in Montevideo, Uruguay. This workshop brought together experts from across South America to review over 300 potential Areas of Interest covering both the South American Atlantic and South American Inland Waters regions. These areas were assessed for their importance to shark, ray, and chimaera life-history processes such as reproduction, aggregation, feeding, or as migratory pathways.

Following careful evaluation and review by an independent panel of experts, 21 and 81 ISRAs were identified for the South American Atlantic and Inland Waters regions, respectively, and are now freely accessible on the ISRA e-Atlas ([www.sharkrayareas.org](http://www.sharkrayareas.org)). Additionally, 39 Areas of Interest were identified to highlight locations where additional research is warranted to confirm their importance to sharks, rays, and chimaeras. The Montevideo event encompassed two concurrent workshops, which were the seventh and eighth in a total series of 13 regional workshops taking place between 2022 and 2027 as part of a global effort to map critical habitats for sharks, rays, and chimaeras. To date, more than 600 ISRAs have been delineated across the remaining six regions assessed.

“Freshwater rays—particularly species from the South American river systems—are among the most threatened groups in the world but are often overlooked. The ISRA process offers a critical step toward recognizing the key habitats of these regional endemics, which are often excluded from traditional aquatic conservation planning. Estuaries, or transition areas from freshwater to marine habitats, are also critical regions for the survival of many chondrichthyan species in South America.” noted Dr. Patricia Charvet, Regional co-Vice Chair for South America within the IUCN Species Survival Commission (SSC) Shark Specialist Group and a freshwater species expert who participated in the workshop.

The delineation of these ISRAs can now support spatial planning, the creation of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), and environmental impact assessments that consider both marine and freshwater environments. In addition to advancing conservation, ISRAs can be used to inform sustainable fisheries strategies and contribute toward national commitments under the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework to protect 30% of the world's ocean and inland waters by 2030.

“We have now completed the assessments for all South American countries and, by engaging widely with scientists, non-governmental organizations, and governments, ensured that no critical habitat is overlooked—whether off the Atlantic or Pacific coasts or within the continent's extensive river basins—highlighting how cross-boundary cooperation and regionally driven efforts are vital for

meaningful progress in conservation,” said Dr. Rima Jabado, Deputy Chair of the IUCN Species Survival Commission and Chair of the IUCN SSC Shark Specialist Group.

The work to delineated areas across the South American continent was supported by 295 contributors working across the region and the ISRA project continues to build a comprehensive global map of critical habitats for the conservation and recovery of sharks, rays, and chimaeras.

“This is a milestone for conservation in the region,” said Dr. Vicente Faria, Regional co-Vice Chair for the South American region of the IUCN SSC Shark Specialist Group. “We have long known the Atlantic coast holds key habitats, but now we have the data and collaboration needed to inform real conservation action. We worked with local fishers, scientists, and communities to identify areas rich in biodiversity and essential for threatened species. It’s now up to decision-makers to act on this information.”

ISRAs are defined as discrete, three-dimensional portions of habitat important to one or more shark, ray, or chimaera species. While ISRAs are not protected areas themselves, they serve as a critical scientific foundation for informing marine and freshwater spatial planning, environmental impact assessments, and future conservation and management measures.

Jabado added, “Identifying ISRAs gives us a clear picture of where action is needed most. But our work doesn’t end here. We must now ensure these areas are considered in national and regional decision-making processes. Without targeted efforts, many of these species may disappear before we truly understand their role in these ecosystems.”

The workshops also revealed significant knowledge and protection gaps. Many areas identified as critical habitats remain unprotected, and data for numerous inland and coastal areas remain limited. These challenges highlight the need for further research, increased collaboration, and stronger integration of shark, ray, and chimaera conservation into South American policy frameworks. As countries move to meet commitments under the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework to protect 30% of land and sea by 2030, ISRAs provide a powerful new spatial tool for governments, NGOs, researchers, and Indigenous and local communities in South America to integrate shark and ray conservation into spatial planning and policy as well as prioritize habitat conservation for some of the most threatened vertebrate species.

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## ORGANIZATIONAL INFORMATION

**Important Shark and Ray Areas project** - [www.sharkrayareas.org](http://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](http://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.

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Workshop participants in Montevideo, Uruguay © IUCN SSC Shark Specialist Group



An Atlantic Nurse Shark - *Ginglymostoma cirratum* © Umeed Mistry | Ocean Image Bank



Largespot River Stingray *Potamotrygon falkneri* | AdobeStock\_749952055