

PRESS RELEASE

New Global Report Identifies Critical Habitats for Migratory Sharks and Rays

IUCN SSC Shark Specialist Group unveils the first-ever coordinated global map of Important Shark and Ray Areas (ISRAs) for CMS-listed sharks and rays

Dubai, United Arab Emirates. January 14, 2026. A landmark report released today by the IUCN Species Survival Commission (SSC) Shark Specialist Group with support from the German Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation, Climate Action and Nuclear Safety and the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS) identifies more than 750 Important Shark and Ray Areas (ISRAs) worldwide, providing the clearest picture to date of the habitats essential for the survival of threatened migratory sharks and rays.

Drawing on the expertise of over 1,330 scientists from over 100 countries, the Ocean Travellers Report synthesizes decades of research to map reproductive sites, migratory corridors, feeding grounds, and aggregation hotspots across 70% of the global ocean, including coastal waters, island chains, continental shelves, offshore seamounts, and areas beyond national jurisdiction (ABNJ).

Sharks and rays are the second most threatened group of vertebrates on Earth, with more than one-third of species at risk of extinction due to overfishing, habitat degradation, and climate change. This report provides an indispensable scientific tool for governments, regional bodies, and ocean managers seeking to integrate biodiversity needs into marine spatial planning, fisheries policy, environmental impact assessment, and area-based conservation.

ISRAs do not create legal protection, but they offer a globally standardized scientific foundation that can guide countries in meeting commitments under CMS, the Sharks MOU, the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF), and the Sustainable Development Goals.

Dr. Rima Jabado, Deputy Chair of the IUCN SSC and Chair of the IUCN SSC Shark Specialist Group, said: “ISRAs spotlight the places where conservation action will have the greatest impact. This is the first time such a globally coordinated mapping effort has been undertaken for sharks and rays. It reveals, with unprecedented clarity, where species reproduce, feed, travel, and take refuge – and gives governments the science they need to safeguard these habitats before it is too late.”

Case studies in the report showcase a diversity of ecological phenomena: migratory corridors linking South Africa and Mozambique; oceanic upwelling systems in the Eastern Tropical Pacific; culturally significant aggregation sites in the Pacific Islands; and unique movement and behavioural patterns in remote archipelagos such as French Polynesia. Many ISRAs overlap with major fishing grounds, shipping routes, and development zones, demonstrating the urgent need to integrate biodiversity science into ocean-use decisions.

Oliver Conz, Director-General, Ministry for the Environment, Climate Action, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety, Germany, said: ‘This report provides exactly the actionable science policymakers need. ISRAs make the invisible visible – the hidden journeys of migratory species across oceans and borders. Germany is committed to supporting CMS and its Parties in strengthening cooperation to ensure that shark and ray conservation is effective, connected, and forward-looking.’

Amy Frankel, Executive Secretary of the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS), a legally binding treaty of the United Nations, noted that “Migratory sharks and rays depend on healthy, connected ocean habitats. ISRAs give governments and stakeholders a powerful tool: a clear map of important

habitats, conservation of which international collaboration is essential. This work strengthens the scientific backbone of CMS and will help governments translate commitments into concrete actions both within national waters and on the high seas.”

Climate change is adding new pressures by altering species distributions, changing ocean currents, and disrupting migratory cues. The report notes that ISRAs can help identify future refugia and resilience hotspots, supporting climate-adapted conservation planning.

The ISRA e-Atlas (www.sharkrayareas.org) provides free, interactive access to all mapped areas, offering unprecedented transparency and accessibility for policymakers, researchers, journalists, and the public.

Next Steps

The next phase of the initiative will focus on supporting CMS Parties, regional bodies, and ocean managers to integrate ISRAs into marine spatial planning, fisheries management, and biodiversity reporting; to strengthen transboundary collaboration; and to apply ISRA insights in emerging governance processes, including the new BBNJ Agreement.

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Summary

A new global report released by the IUCN SSC Shark Specialist Group, with support from the German Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation, Climate Action and Nuclear Safety and the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS), identifies over 750 Important Shark and Ray Areas (ISRAs) across 70% of the world’s ocean. Drawing on contributions from 1,330 experts in more than 100 countries, the *Ocean Travellers Report* provides the first coordinated global map of critical habitats for migratory sharks and rays – including reproductive sites, feeding grounds, migratory corridors, and aggregation hotspots.

With sharks and rays now the second most threatened group of vertebrates, ISRAs offer a standardized scientific foundation to guide marine spatial planning, fisheries management, environmental assessments, and international commitments under CMS, the Sharks MOU, the Global Biodiversity Framework, and the SDGs. The report underscores the need for coordinated, science-based action to protect essential habitats in both national waters and the high seas.

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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.

With over 11,000 members in 186 territories, the Species Survival Commission (SSC) is the largest of the seven expert Commissions of IUCN and enables it to influence, encourage and assist societies to conserve biodiversity by building knowledge on the status and threats to species, providing advice, developing policies and guidelines, facilitating conservation planning, and catalysing conservation action. The SSC has been recognised as “the world's largest volunteer conservation-science network” by Guinness World Records®. Learn more at www.iucn.org/ssc.

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.

Media kit: High-resolution maps and graphics are available upon request.

For more information:

Download the report: <https://sharkrayareas.org/download/ocean-travellers-safeguarding-critical-habitats-for-migratory-sharks-and-rays>

Explore ISRAs on the e-Atlas: www.sharkrayareas.org

Learn more about CMS and the Sharks MOU: www.cms.int/sharks

Media Contacts:

Dr. Rima Jabado, Chair, IUCN SSC Shark Specialist Group – rimajabado@hotmail.com