

A third of sharks, rays and chimaeras are threatened with extinction, as new report narrows in on solutions

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) has released a report, *Global Status of Sharks, Rays and Chimaeras*, that highlights new knowledge compiled by 353 experts from 115 countries and stresses the urgent need to address overfishing and bycatch in all countries.

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Summary: *The IUCN Species Survival Commission (SSC) Shark Specialist Group (SSG) has published a status report on sharks, rays and chimaeras, nearly 20 years after its first report warned that sharks were threatened but underrepresented in conservation. Today we understand more about sharks, rays and chimaeras than ever before, but the scale of their declines threatens to outstrip improvements made in research and policy.*

In Oman, shark liver oil is used in traditional eyeliner. In Indonesia, shark and ray skins are packaged as chips. Skates are the seafood counterpoint to buffalo wings at restaurants in the USA, along with mako and thresher sharks. Across Europe, you can sling a luxury stingray skin bag over your shoulder as you sample shark meat sold as European conger, order *veau de mer* in France, and find ray cheeks purveyed as a delicacy in Belgium. Ray and shark skins are fashioned into shoes, wallets, belts, handbags and purses in Thailand. In Yemen, even the corneas of shark eyes have been reportedly used for human transplant and the cartilage is marketed as a cure to all sorts of human ailments.

These are the extraordinary country-by-country insights detailed in the report, which consolidates the biology, fisheries, trade, conservation efforts and policy reforms for sharks, rays and chimaeras across 158 countries and jurisdictions.

More than 2,000 pages long, the report follows one in 2005 that highlighted a rise in the global fin trade and the low conservation profile of sharks, and especially rays and chimaeras.

Since then, the global demand for shark meat has nearly doubled: the value of shark and ray meat is now 1.7 times the value of the global fin trade. Trade has diversified and products such as ray gill plates, liver oil and skins are valued at nearly US\$1-billion annually.

Sarah Fowler of the Save Our Seas Foundation (SOSF) led the 2005 report's publication and contributed to the latest version. She says, 'The conservation and management of sharks is difficult for a variety of reasons, but many governments are breaking down the

silos that separate how we deal with sharks and rays as fisheries resources, and as wildlife to conserve.’

‘Nearly 20 years after the first report, there have been drastic changes, with sharks and rays now among the most threatened vertebrates on the planet,’ explains Alexandra Morata, the IUCN SSC SSG programme officer.

Overfishing is driving most species to extinction. Indonesia, Spain and India are the world’s largest shark fishing nations, with Mexico and the USA adding to the top five shark catchers. But only 26% of species globally are targeted: most are caught (and retained) as bycatch. Huge population declines have been seen in the rhino rays (such as wedgefish), whiptails, angel sharks and gulper sharks.

But two decades of research and major policy changes also mean that the solutions are now outlined country by country and can guide governments to implement conservation action and make fisheries sustainable.

‘This report is a call to action so we can work together and make each of the country recommendations a reality, especially those relating to responsible fisheries management. It is the only way these species will survive and continue to thrive in aquatic ecosystems,’ says Dr Rima Jabado, the IUCN SSC deputy chair and SSG chair who led the 2024 report.

We need sharks, rays and chimaeras. We are only beginning to decipher the role they play in delivering life-supporting resources and services. Some species cycle nutrients around the ocean; others help us fight climate change by acting as carbon sinks or maintaining carbon sequestering ecosystems like mangroves. They underpin food security in vulnerable coastal communities. In some developing nations, fishers have reported that more than 80% of their income depends on shark and ray fisheries.

‘The report is also a reflection of the tremendous dedication of scientists, researchers and conservationists who are working as a community to contribute to conservation and make a lasting change,’ Dr Jabado adds.

Access to remote areas, especially across Africa, has increased scientific understanding of the scale of exploitation. Knowledge has improved significantly in Asia, Africa, Central America, the Caribbean and the Indian Ocean. There are also hopeful instances of sustainable fisheries in Canada, the USA and Australia.

There have been incredible strides in research and policy, but this hard work will only save species from extinction if the report’s recommendations are implemented nationally.

'The message is clear,' says Dr Jabado. 'With the precarious state of many of these species, we can't afford to wait.'

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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 organisations. It is a membership union with more than 1,400 member organisations and over 17,000 volunteer scientists in more than 160 countries. This diversity and vast expertise make 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 10,000 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.

About the Save Our Seas Foundation

Founded in Geneva, Switzerland, in 2003, the Save Our Seas Foundation (SOSF) is a philanthropic organisation whose ultimate goal is to create a legacy of securing the health and sustainability of our oceans, and the communities that depend on them, for generations to come.

Its support for research, conservation and education projects worldwide focuses on endangered sharks, rays and skates. Three permanent SOSF research and education centres reinforce its actions in Seychelles, South Africa and the USA.

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