

Sharks, rays, and chimaeras are overfished: new report outlines Mediterranean solutions.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Global Status of Sharks, Rays, and Chimaeras 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 twenty years after their first report warned 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.*

Blue sharks and shortfin makos stock the freezers of Spanish supermarkets, their meat a byproduct of the swordfish and tuna fleets in the North Atlantic. Mislabeled or stocked under common names like *cazón*, *marrajo*, or *quenlla* to reach a higher price, sharks and rays are misidentified and misreported. In Italy, consumers are rarely aware that they are buying shark or ray meat when choosing *verdesca*, *cagnolo*, *gattuccio*, *palombo*, and *razze*. And 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. Sharks, rays and chimaeras are in demand; their meat and fins are used everywhere, and their body products used in increasingly varied ways across the planet.

These are the insights from a landmark global report that details country-by-country information consolidating the biology, fisheries, trade, conservation efforts and policy reforms for sharks, rays, and chimaeras across 158 countries and jurisdictions.

“The Mediterranean, and also the Black Sea, constitute perhaps one of the most problematic marine regions in the world,” says Fabrizio Serena, the IUCN SSG Mediterranean and Black Seas co-Regional Vice Chair based at the National Research Council–Institute of Marine Biological Resources and Biotechnologies in Livorno, Italy. “Many countries with different languages, different religions, and different political interests all face the same sea from which they think they are exploiting the same shared resource. The proposed Global Report is certainly a useful tool to promote, where possible, cooperation between the countries.”

The 2,000+-page report follows on from the 2005 report, which 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: shark and ray meat are now valued at 1.7 times that of the global fin trade. Trade has diversified and products such as ray gill plates, liver oil, and ray skins are valued at nearly US\$1 billion annually.

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 5 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 (e.g., wedgefishes), whiptails, angel sharks, and gulper sharks.

Closer to home, Spain, Italy and Portugal are among the world's largest traders in shark meat. The nations of the European Union account for around 22% of the global meat trade; its Member States are some of the most important traders in the volume and value of shark, ray and chimaera products and they act as key trade bridges in the global network. The EU is therefore very well placed to make a hugely positive impact on the future of sharks, rays and chimaeras if its fisheries are sustainably managed, bycatch is reduced, and trade regulations are enforced.

The Mediterranean countries, specifically, require greater harmony of efforts, including the monitoring and management of the diverse and highly active fisheries across the region. The report emphasises that education for consumers about where sharks, rays, and chimaeras are ending up, from food to wellness products, is paramount.

“This report is a call to action so we can work together and make each of the country recommendations a reality, especially those related 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.

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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 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 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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