

IUCN SSC Shark Specialist Group Workshop to Assess the Status of Chondrichthyan Fishes in the Northeast Atlantic and Mediterranean Regions

A STING IN THE TALE FOR SHARKS AND RAYS

Expert findings show sharks and rays are now amongst Europe's most threatened animals as more are added to the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species

Gland, Switzerland, 20 February 2006 (IUCN) – The number of species of sharks and rays on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species will increase based on the findings of a three-day expert workshop, hosted by the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC), that examined the conservation status of the species in the Northeast Atlantic and Mediterranean waters.



The workshop confirms the widely-accepted notion that slow-growing sharks and rays are exceptionally vulnerable to over-fishing, and that deep-water species are being depleted at an alarming rate. Some formerly important commercial species are now so rare that they are no longer being sought by fishermen, but their risk of extinction is still rising because of continued incidental capture in fisheries for more abundant species. This situation is exacerbated by the lack of shark fisheries management in European waters.

"Sharks and rays are amongst the most threatened animal groups in the UK today. I welcome the development of a Red List baseline, against which to monitor the hoped-for changes in their status that should arise from increased awareness of their plight," said Dr Malcolm Vincent, JNCC's Director of Science.

Nearly 100 species of sharks and rays were evaluated against the IUCN Red List Categories and Criteria. Categories range from Extinct to Least Concern and Data Deficient. Species

deemed Vulnerable, Endangered or Critically Endangered are considered threatened with extinction and are added to the global IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. The IUCN Shark Specialist Group, which convened the meeting, will compile these assessments for a regional report that will include recommendations for conservation action.



Proposed additions to the Red List include three species of angel sharks, two species of skates, and several species of deep-water sharks, all of which are considered Critically Endangered in the region, as well as two species of coastal ray, now considered Endangered. The species found to be at lowest risk were generally small and fast-growing coastal species, like cuckoo ray and lesser-spotted catshark, and very deep ocean species that are still beyond the reach of today's fishing fleets.

Angel sharks, formerly abundant large coastal sharks, were once a common sight in fish markets, but have largely vanished, almost unnoticed, from the European seas that are their world stronghold.

"Now officially declared extinct in the North Sea by the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (fisheries advisers to European countries), the angel shark was nominated in 2001 for strict legal protection in British waters, but we are still waiting for government action on this proposal," said Sarah Fowler, Co-Chair of the Shark Specialist Group. "Workshop participants emphasised the urgency of protecting this, and many other imperilled species."

Three species of deep-water sharks, taken as incidental catch in fisheries and increasingly targeted for their meat and rich liver oil, were assessed as threatened. A population decline of 80-95% prompted a Critically Endangered classification for the region's deep-water gulper shark.

"These exceptionally slow-growing sharks are simply not biologically equipped to withstand such intense fishing pressure," said Tom Blasdale, Marine Species Adviser at the JNCC. "We welcome recent European Union action to manage deep-water gillnet fisheries, but

similar measures are still urgently needed to protect deep-water sharks taken by trawls and longlines.”



The shortfin mako shark, a favourite target of commercial and recreational fishermen around the world, was proposed as Vulnerable in the Northeast Atlantic and Critically Endangered in the Mediterranean Sea.

“This wide-ranging species is increasingly the target of fisheries and yet lacks any type of protective measures in this region,” warned Alen Soldo of the Institute of Oceanography and Fisheries in Croatia. “Of particular concern are mako sharks in the Mediterranean, where our findings revealed ongoing fishing pressure well beyond the reproductive capacity of the species.”

In contrast to similar workshops held in North America, South Africa, and Australia, the workshop yielded little if any good news, due largely to the lack of shark and ray conservation measures in this region. Protection is granted by just a handful of European countries for the three largest species (basking shark, devil ray, and great white shark). The few European shark and ray quotas in place are routinely set far in excess of actual catches and therefore do not limit fishing pressure. They also cover only part of these stocks. Scientists’ advice for zero catch of many depleted shark and ray species has been ignored. There are no international limits on shark catch, even as fisheries for wide-ranging shark species (such as mako and blue sharks) expand and evidence of their declines mounts.

Scientists from government agencies, universities, and private institutions participated in the workshop including authors of published papers on shark and skate population status and experts who develop advice on shark quotas for European and international fisheries of the Northeast Atlantic. Experts from England, Scotland, Ireland, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Croatia,

Russia, Sweden, Canada, and the USA took part.

The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species is the world's most authoritative guide to the status of biological diversity. The workshop was the eighth in a global series to assess all of the world's shark and ray species and develop regional conservation priorities. Resulting Red List proposals are preliminary until accepted by the global Shark Specialist Group network.

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Notes for Editors:

Joint Nature Conservation Committee

JNCC is the UK Government's wildlife adviser, undertaking national and international conservation work on behalf of the three country nature conservation agencies - English Nature, Scottish Natural Heritage and the Countryside Council for Wales

<http://www.jncc.gov.uk/>

The World Conservation Union (IUCN)

The World Conservation Union is the world's largest conservation network. The Union brings together 82 States, 111 government agencies, more than 800 non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and some 10,000 scientists and experts from 181 countries in a unique worldwide partnership.

The Union's mission is to influence, encourage and assist societies throughout the world to conserve the integrity and diversity of nature and to ensure that any use of natural resources is equitable and ecologically sustainable. The World Conservation Union is a multicultural, multilingual organisation with 1000 staff located in 62 countries. Its headquarters are in Gland, Switzerland.

<http://www.iucn.org/en/about/>

The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species

The IUCN Red List is widely recognized as the most comprehensive source of information on the global conservation status of plant and animal species and, in the context of the Shark Specialist Group, can be used as a tool for measuring and monitoring changes in the status of chondrichthyan (sharks, rays and chimaeras) biodiversity and our knowledge of the taxa. Red Lists are among the most widely used tools available to conservationists worldwide for focusing attention on species of conservation concern. They are an essential basis to enable management priorities to be targeted and for monitoring the long-term success of management and conservation initiatives. The assessments evaluate the conservation status of individual species, identify threatening processes affecting them and, if necessary, propose recovery objectives for their populations.

<http://www.iucn.org/themes/ssc/red-lists.htm>

IUCN Shark Specialist Group

The Shark Specialist Group (SSG) of IUCN's Species Survival Commission aims to promote the long-term conservation of the world's chondrichthyan fishes, effective management of their fisheries and habitats and, where necessary, the recovery of their populations. One of the roles central to the SSG's mission is the preparation of species assessments for the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species TM.

The SSG is currently part way through a programme to complete assessments of all chondrichthyan species (>1,100 worldwide) by the end of 2007. This is being undertaken through a series of regional workshops to facilitate detailed discussions and pooling of resources. To date, workshops have been held for Australia & Oceania, sub-equatorial Africa, South America, the Mediterranean, and North & Central America. There have also been two workshops for Batoids (skates and rays) and deep sea species. As a result, approximately 550 chondrichthyan assessments have been submitted to the Red List, with another 320 in preparation.