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## Third of open ocean sharks threatened with extinction

**Gland, Switzerland, June 25, 2009 (IUCN)** – The first study to determine the global conservation status of 64 species of open ocean (pelagic) sharks and rays reveals that 32 percent are threatened with extinction, primarily due to overfishing, according to the IUCN Shark Specialist Group.

The percentage of open ocean shark species threatened with extinction is higher for the sharks taken in high-seas fisheries (52 percent), than for the group as a whole.

*“Despite mounting threats, sharks remain virtually unprotected on the high seas,” says **Sonja Fordham, Deputy Chair of the IUCN Shark Specialist Group and Policy Director for the Shark Alliance.** “The vulnerability and lengthy migrations of most open ocean sharks call for coordinated, international conservation plans. Our report documents serious overfishing of these species, in national and international waters, and demonstrates a clear need for immediate action on a global scale.”*

The report comes days before Spain hosts an international summit of fishery managers responsible for high seas tuna fisheries in which sharks are taken without limit. It also coincides with an international group of scientists meeting in Denmark to formulate management advice for Atlantic porbeagle sharks.

IUCN experts classify great hammerhead (*Sphyrna mokarran*) and scalloped hammerhead (*Sphyrna lewini*) sharks, as well as giant devil rays (*Mobula mobular*), as globally Endangered. Smooth hammerheads (*Sphyrna zygaena*), great white (*Carcharodon carcharias*), basking (*Cetorhinus maximus*) and oceanic whitetip (*Carcharhinus longimanus*) sharks are classed as globally Vulnerable to extinction, along with two species of makos (*Isurus* spp.) and three species of threshers (*Alopias* spp.).

Porbeagle sharks (*Lamna nasus*) are classified as globally Vulnerable, but Critically Endangered and Endangered in the Northeast and Northwest Atlantic, respectively. The blue shark (*Prionace glauca*), the world’s most abundant and heavily fished open ocean shark, is classified as Near Threatened.

Many open ocean sharks are taken mainly in high seas tuna and swordfish fisheries. Once considered only incidental “bycatch”, these species are increasingly targeted due to new markets for shark meat and high demand for their valuable fins, used in the Asian delicacy shark fin soup. To source this demand, the fins are often cut off sharks and the rest of the body is thrown back in the water, a process known as “finning”. Finning bans have been adopted for most international waters, but lenient enforcement standards hamper their effectiveness.

Sharks are particularly sensitive to overfishing due to their tendency to take many years to mature and have relatively few young. In most cases, pelagic shark catches are unregulated or unsustainable. Twenty-four percent of the species examined are categorized as Near Threatened, while information is insufficient to assess another 25 percent.

The report is based partially on an SSG workshop funded by the Lenfest Ocean Program. Fifteen experts from government agencies, universities, non-governmental organizations, and institutions around the world took part. This and other regional workshops have contributed to the development of the Shark Specialist Group’s Global Shark Red List Assessment, supported by Conservation International and the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation.

*“The completion of this global assessment of pelagic sharks and rays will provide an important baseline for monitoring the status of these keystone species in our oceans,” says **Roger McManus, Vice-President for Marine Programs at Conservation International.***

The IUCN Shark Specialist Group calls on governments to set catch limits for sharks and rays based on scientific advice and the precautionary approach. It further urges governments to fully protect Critically Endangered and Endangered species of sharks and rays, ensure an end to shark finning and improve the monitoring of fisheries taking sharks and rays. Governments should invest in shark and ray research and population assessment, minimize incidental bycatch of sharks and rays, employ wildlife treaties to complement fisheries management and facilitate cooperation among countries to conserve shared populations, according to the group.

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**Notes to editors**

- The full report, **The Conservation Status of Pelagic Sharks and Rays: Report of the IUCN Shark Specialist Group Pelagic Shark Red List Workshop**, can be downloaded here [http://cmsdata.iucn.org/downloads/ssg\\_pelagic\\_report\\_final.pdf](http://cmsdata.iucn.org/downloads/ssg_pelagic_report_final.pdf). It was compiled and edited by Merry Camhi, Sarah Valenti, Sonja Fordham, Sarah Fowler and Claudine Gibson.
- This week, scientists from the International Council for Exploration of the Sea (ICES) and the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) are meeting in Copenhagen to assess all Atlantic porbeagle populations and formulate recommendations for fishery managers.
- Next week, San Sebastian, Spain will be the site of the second Joint Meeting of the five Regional Fishery Management Organizations (RFMOs) for tuna.

**About IUCN**

IUCN, International Union for Conservation of Nature, helps the world find pragmatic solutions to our most pressing environment and development challenges.

IUCN works on biodiversity, climate change, energy, human livelihoods and greening the world economy by supporting scientific research, managing field projects all over the world, and bringing governments, NGOs, the UN and companies together to develop policy, laws and best practice.

IUCN is the world's oldest and largest global environmental organization, with more than 1,000 government and NGO members and almost 11,000 volunteer experts in some 160 countries. IUCN's work is supported by over 1,000 staff in 60 offices and hundreds of partners in public, NGO and private sectors around the world.

[www.iucn.org](http://www.iucn.org)

**The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species™** is the most comprehensive conservation inventory of the world's plant and animal species and a widely used tool for focusing attention on species of conservation concern. The assessments evaluate the conservation status of individual species, identify threatening processes affecting them and, if necessary, propose recovery objectives for their populations. [www.iucnredlist.org](http://www.iucnredlist.org).

The **IUCN Red List threat categories** are the following, in descending order of threat:

- Extinct or Extinct in the Wild
- Critically Endangered, Endangered and Vulnerable: species threatened with extinction
- Near Threatened: species close to the threatened thresholds
- Least Concern: species evaluated with a low risk of extinction
- Data Deficient: no evaluation because of insufficient data

Species classified as Vulnerable, Endangered or Critically Endangered are considered Threatened.

The **IUCN Shark Specialist Group (SSG)** is a network of 180 experts from 90 countries who are involved in research, fisheries management, marine conservation or policy development and implementation for chondrichthyan fishes (sharks and their relatives; the skates, rays and chimaeras). The group's mission is to promote the long-term conservation of these species, effective management of their fisheries and habitats and, where necessary, the recovery of their populations. The SSG is responsible for assessing the status of the >1,000 species of chondrichthyan fishes. [www.iucnssg.org](http://www.iucnssg.org)

The **Shark Alliance** is coalition of 72 conservation, scientific and recreational organizations dedicated to improving European policies with respect to sharks and rays. By reaching out to the public, governments, interest groups and the media, the Alliance strives to secure science-based national, EU and international conservation measures for these vulnerable species. The Shark Alliance was initiated and is coordinated by the Pew Environment Group, the conservation arm of the Pew Charitable Trusts, a non-government organization that is working to end over fishing in the world's oceans. [www.sharkalliance.org](http://www.sharkalliance.org)

**Conservation International (CI)** applies innovations in science, economics, and policy and community participation to protect the Earth's richest regions of plant and animal diversity and demonstrate that human societies can live harmoniously with nature. Founded in 1987, CI works in more than 40 countries on four continents to help people find economic alternatives

without harming their natural environments. [www.conservation.org](http://www.conservation.org)

The **Global Marine Species Assessment** (GMSA) began in late 2005 and is headquartered in the Department of Biological Sciences at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia. This project is a joint initiative between IUCN and CI and will be the first global review of the conservation status of every marine vertebrate species, and of selected invertebrates and plants. The project involves a range of partners in compiling and analyzing all existing data on approximately 20,000 marine species, and will determine the risk of extinction according to the IUCN Red List Categories and Criteria. [www.sci.odu.edu/gmsa](http://www.sci.odu.edu/gmsa). The GMSA is supported by the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation. <http://www.nhcf.org/index.cfm>

The **Lenfest Ocean Program** supports scientific research aimed at forging solutions to the challenges facing the global marine environment. The program was established in 2004 by the Lenfest Foundation and is managed by the Pew Environment Group. [www.lenfestocean.org](http://www.lenfestocean.org)