

IUCN Shark Specialist Group assessment of Northeast Atlantic sharks, rays and chimaeras for the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species™

Fact sheet on conservation status of key species

The Shark Specialist Group of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) has determined that 26% of the 116 species of Northeast Atlantic sharks and closely related rays and chimaeras (collectively known as “chondrichthyan fish”) are threatened with extinction (7% *Critically Endangered*, 7% *Endangered*, 12% *Vulnerable*). A further 20% are classified as *Near Threatened*, 27% are considered *Least Concern*, and 27% are *Data Deficient*. The Northeast Atlantic region’s percentage of chondrichthyan species classified as *Threatened* is significantly higher than the same statistic globally (26% v. 18%).

Species assessed as *Critically Endangered* in the Northeast Atlantic include the two sharks that are most prized in Europe for their meat: **spiny dogfish** and **porbeagle** sharks. These species are among the few that are subject to EU fishing quotas and yet those limits are set well above the zero catches advised by scientists with the International Council for Exploration of the Sea (ICES) for avoiding collapse.

Angel sharks and **common skates** are also classified as *Critically Endangered* in the region. ICES recently called on EU fishery managers to end fishing for common skates and provide angel sharks with the “highest possible protection”. Currently, common skate catches are limited in some areas of the North Sea under broad skate and ray fishing quotas. Angel sharks are protected only in English waters.

Also assessed as *Critically Endangered* in the Northeast Atlantic is the **gulper shark**, one of several deepwater species sought for the rich liver oil that is used in cosmetics. Generally, **deepwater sharks** are faring worse in this region than globally, due to loosely regulated, targeted fishing by European vessels. Since 2005, ICES has recommended setting deepwater shark catch limits at zero, but more than 800 tonnes can be taken legally in 2009 as part of a gradual fishery phase-out.

Two types of **sawfish** are listed in the report as *Critically Endangered*, although many scientists assume the species are already extinct in European waters, based on a lack of records over many decades.

Two species of **guitarfish**, rays whose fins are among the world’s most prized for use in the Asian delicacy *shark fin soup*, are classified as *Endangered* in the Northeast Atlantic. There are no European limits on catches of guitarfish.

The immense **basking shark** is more threatened in the Northeast Atlantic than elsewhere; the species is listed as *Vulnerable* globally but *Endangered* in the study area. Although targeted fisheries have ended, basking sharks remain valuable for their huge livers as well as their fins which are used to make and to advertise the *shark fin soup* sold in Chinese restaurants. This second largest of the world’s fish is now protected in EU waters but is still occasionally landed illegally.

The highly migratory **bigeye thresher** shark is listed as *Vulnerable** on a global scale. Scientists recently determined that this species is at greater risk for overfishing by open-ocean longline fisheries than any other oceanic shark. There are no limits on catches of bigeye threshers in the Northeast Atlantic.

Tope, also known as the soupfin shark, has been assessed as *Vulnerable* on a global scale but *Data Deficient* in the Northeast Atlantic. English and Welsh governments have learned from tope depletion in other parts of the world and recently enacted precautionary bans on targeted fishing for the species.

The **blue shark**, the dominant shark species taken in open-ocean longline fisheries, is considered *Near Threatened*. Blue sharks cross entire ocean basins and multiple jurisdictions but are not subject to any EU or international catch limits.

Only two chondrichthyan species appear to be doing better in Northeast Atlantic than in other parts of the world. The **common thresher** was assessed as *Vulnerable** on a global scale, but *Near Threatened* in the Northeast Atlantic. In addition, the **starry ray** (also known as thorny skate) is considered of *Least Concern** in the Northeast Atlantic while the species' global status is *Vulnerable*. The starry ray is considered *Critically Endangered** off the Northeast coast of the United States and is the subject of the world's only international catch limit for a chondrichthyan (in the Northwest Atlantic).

Chondrichthyans considered to be of *Least Concern* include relatively small and fast-growing coastal species, such as **catsharks** and **smoothhounds**, and species living in the very deep ocean beyond the range of today's fisheries, such as **chimaeras** and **goblin sharks**.

Upcoming Opportunities for Improving Shark and Ray Status

This week, the Northeast Atlantic Fisheries Commission (**NEAFC**) holds its annual meeting in London. Sharks and rays are taken as bycatch in international trawl fisheries regulated by NEAFC.

Later this month in Marrakech, Parties to the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (**ICCAT**), including the EU and Norway, will consider new scientific advice for oceanic sharks. ICCAT manages international fisheries for tuna and swordfish and is the only regulatory body currently capable of setting Atlantic-wide, international limits on shark catches. ICCAT scientists have highlighted the bigeye thresher as a particularly vulnerable species that would benefit from a mandatory release rule.

In early December in Rome, Parties to the Convention on Migratory Species (**CMS**), including the EU and Norway, will consider proposals to list *Critically Endangered* spiny dogfish and porbeagle sharks as well as the two *Vulnerable* mako shark species on CMS Appendix II (from the EU and Croatia, respectively). Such listings which would encourage collaboration on regional conservation initiatives. Immediately after their Conference of Parties, CMS will host another meeting in Rome to discuss development of a global agreement for sharks.

In mid December in Brussels, the European Council of Ministers will agree **2009 EU catch limits** for skates and rays as well as spiny dogfish and porbeagle sharks. New limits may be established for *Critically Endangered* angel sharks and common skates. The quota setting process begins with proposals from the European Commission which are influenced by ICES advice and expected to be released within the coming weeks.

Also in December in Brussels, the European Commission will present its long-awaited **Community Plan of Action** for Sharks which can serve as a blueprint for future conservation actions affecting chondrichthyans. The formal response from the Council of Ministers is expected in early 2009.

Specific Fisheries Management Recommendations

The SSG Northeast Atlantic report aims to inform policies for the conservation and sustainable use of Northeast Atlantic chondrichthyan fishes and provides advice to that end. Specifically, the report includes management recommendations urging countries with vessels fishing in the Northeast Atlantic to:

- implement Action Plans and national conservation measures for sharks;
- record and report data on shark, ray and chimaera catches;
- engage in international shark and ray conservation initiatives;

- collaborate on assessments of the population status and conservation requirements of Northeast Atlantic chondrichthyans;
- promote and enforce fishing limits for chondrichthyans in line with scientific advice from ICES, including:
 - total allowable catches (TACs) of zero for spiny dogfish and deepwater sharks;
 - a reduced skate and ray TAC and expansion of the area subject to this TAC;
 - an end to fishing for common skates and undulate rays;
 - a prohibition on landings of porbeagle, white skates, and angel sharks; and
 - caps on catches for other bottom-dwelling sharks and rays.
- apply the precautionary approach with respect to chondrichthyan fishing limits;
- strengthen shark finning bans by requiring that sharks be landed with their fins attached;
- research and protect the habitat essential to chondrichthyans;
- reduce fishing capacity and effort; and
- minimize regional chondrichthyan bycatch.

In addition, the report calls on Regional Fishery Management Organizations, particularly the Northeast Atlantic Fisheries Commission (NEAFC) and the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT), to:

- develop Regional Action Plans for Sharks;
- encourage reporting of species-specific shark and ray catch data;
- work to improve shark and ray population assessments;
- implement available scientific advice for shark and ray fishing limits;
- protect particularly vulnerable shark and ray species taken in international Atlantic fisheries, such as porbeagles, bigeye threshers and deepwater sharks; and
- strengthen finning bans by requiring that sharks be landed with their fins attached.

For more information please contact: Mona Samari, Tel: +44 (0) 7515 828 939,

Email: mona@communicationsinc.co.uk

* Red List assessment has been submitted for inclusion in the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species™ in 2009 and is subject to review prior to publication in the Red List.