

Protecting Sharks in the Pacific

People need healthy oceans, and healthy oceans need sharks

Sharks need our help. Many of the more than 500 species swimming in the ocean today are not equipped to withstand the growing number of human-related threats they face.

Because sharks grow slowly, are late to mature, and produce few young, they are especially vulnerable to overfishing and slow to recover from depletion. The demand for fins and other shark products has driven a number of species close to extinction.

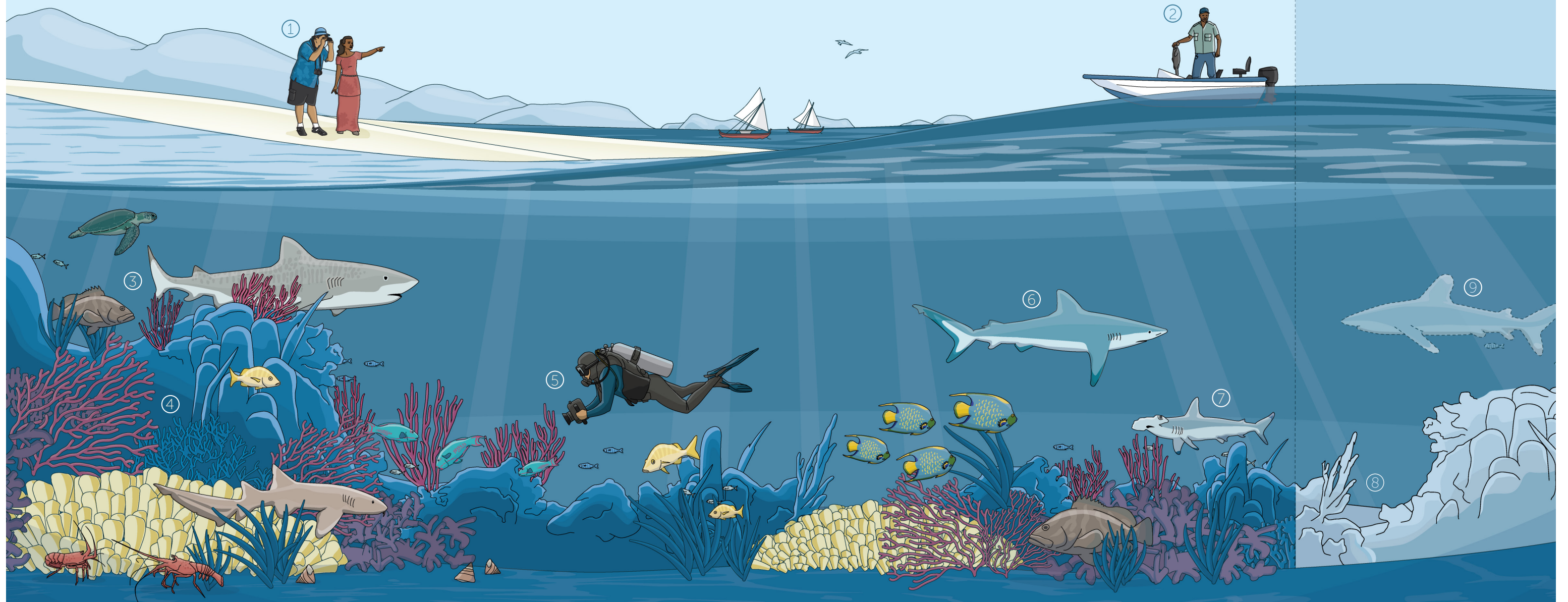
Losing sharks could have consequences for the entire ocean ecosystem. These predators help maintain the health of marine life, including populations of commercially important fish species.

Sharks are also important culturally to Pacific islanders. In many places, they are respected as ancestors or worshipped as gods, serving as a symbol for some clans and families. Some Pacific cultures consider eating shark taboo.¹

Palau, the Marshall Islands, French Polynesia, the Cook Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, and New Caledonia have established shark sanctuaries throughout their exclusive economic zones (EEZs), making them the first Pacific island governments to do so. All six have banned the commercial fishing and trade of sharks throughout their waters. By committing to comprehensive and permanent conservation measures, they have established themselves as global leaders in protecting these animals so critical to the health of the ocean.

Momentum for protecting sharks across the region is growing: In 2013, the Association of Pacific Island Legislatures called on all Pacific nations to end the unsustainable commercial fishing of sharks. By early 2015, all of the needed governments had acted to establish the transboundary Micronesia Regional Shark Sanctuary, setting a precedent for protections that span large, contiguous areas.

The Importance of Sharks to Islands



1 Healthy reefs drive economies

Healthy reefs are also vital to tourism. They attract divers, snorkelers, recreational fishers, and other visitors from overseas.

2 Reefs protect us and provide for us

Coral reefs help protect coastal communities and infrastructure from the impacts of wave action and storms. They also provide shelter, breeding areas, nurseries, and food for shellfish, invertebrates, and fish. The waters surrounding reefs are a significant source of protein for over a billion people globally.

3 Top predator in the food web

Sharks help maintain the health of marine life in the ocean, including populations of commercially important fish species. Like wolves and other top predators on land, sharks play an important role in the ecosystem and should gain similar protections.

4 Healthy reefs need sharks

Science now shows that sharks help maintain the health of coral reefs.²

5 Sharks are worth more alive than dead

An individual reef shark is estimated to have a lifetime value of US\$1.9 million to the tourism industry.³ In contrast, the value of a dead shark is estimated at about US\$108.

6 More like whales than fish

Unlike other fish, sharks grow slowly, mature late, and produce few young over long lifetimes. As a result, they are at high risk of overexploitation and slow to recover from depletion.

7 Not just fins

Approximately 100 million sharks are killed every year in commercial fisheries.⁴ Products include fins, meat, skins, liver oil, and jaws.

8 The danger of not knowing

The loss of sharks in our oceans can lead to unpredictable consequences, including the possible collapse of important fisheries and the loss of corals and other marine habitats.

9 Threatened with extinction

Nearly 30 percent of known shark species fully assessed by scientists are threatened with extinction. Another 26 percent are nearing threatened status.⁵

Defining permanent protections for sharks

Shark sanctuaries are the strongest measures that governments can put in place to permanently protect sharks in their waters. These protections establish national or territory-wide fishing regulations—through decrees, legislation, or regulatory amendments—that prohibit the commercial fishing of sharks throughout their EEZs. To be most effective, these measures should:

- Prohibit commercial fishing of sharks in the entire EEZ, not just in certain areas. This ensures that sharks are protected everywhere under that government’s jurisdiction.
- Prohibit the sale, import, export, and possession of sharks and shark parts, including fins.
- Impose steep fines for violations that match the high value of shark fins.
- Prohibit the use of fishing gear typically used to target sharks, such as wire leaders and shark lines from longline fishing vessels.
- Implement policies and laws that make enforcement at port easier and more likely to occur. Among possible steps are banning transshipment of catch at sea and ratifying the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization Agreement on Port State Measures to Prevent, Deter, and Eliminate Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated Fishing.

Healthy commercial fish stocks need healthy coral reefs, and healthy reefs need sharks. By permanently protecting sharks, the governments of the Pacific can strengthen the resilience of their marine environments and secure the sustainability of industries that depend on a healthy ocean.

Endnotes

- 1 Todd Ames, “Maritime Culture in the Western Pacific: A Touch of Tradition,” *Pacific Asia Inquiry* 4, no. 1 (2013): 94-108, http://www.uog.edu/sites/default/files/ames_maritime-culture.pdf.
- 2 Jonathan L.W. Ruppert et al., “Caught in the Middle: Combined Impacts of Shark Removal and Coral Loss on the Fish Communities of Coral Reefs,” *PLOS ONE* 8, no. 9 (2013): e74648, doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0074648, <http://www.plosone.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0074648>.
- 3 G.M.S. Vianna et al., *Wanted Dead or Alive? The Relative Value of Reef Sharks as a Fishery and an Ecotourism Asset in Palau* (Perth: Australian Institute of Marine Science and University of Western Australia, 2010), http://www.pewtrusts.org/~media/Imported-and-Legacy/uploadedfiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/reports/protecting_ocean_life/Palaueconomicanalysisforsharks.pdf.
- 4 Boris Worm et al., “Global Catches, Exploitation Rates, and Rebuilding Options for Sharks,” *Marine Policy* 40 (2013): 194-204, doi:10.1016/j.marpol.2012.12.034, <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0308597X13000055>.
- 5 International Union for Conservation of Nature, “The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, Version 2014.3” (2014), <http://www.iucnredlist.org>.

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