

# Protecting Sharks in the British Virgin Islands

## People Need Healthy Oceans, and Healthy Oceans Need Sharks

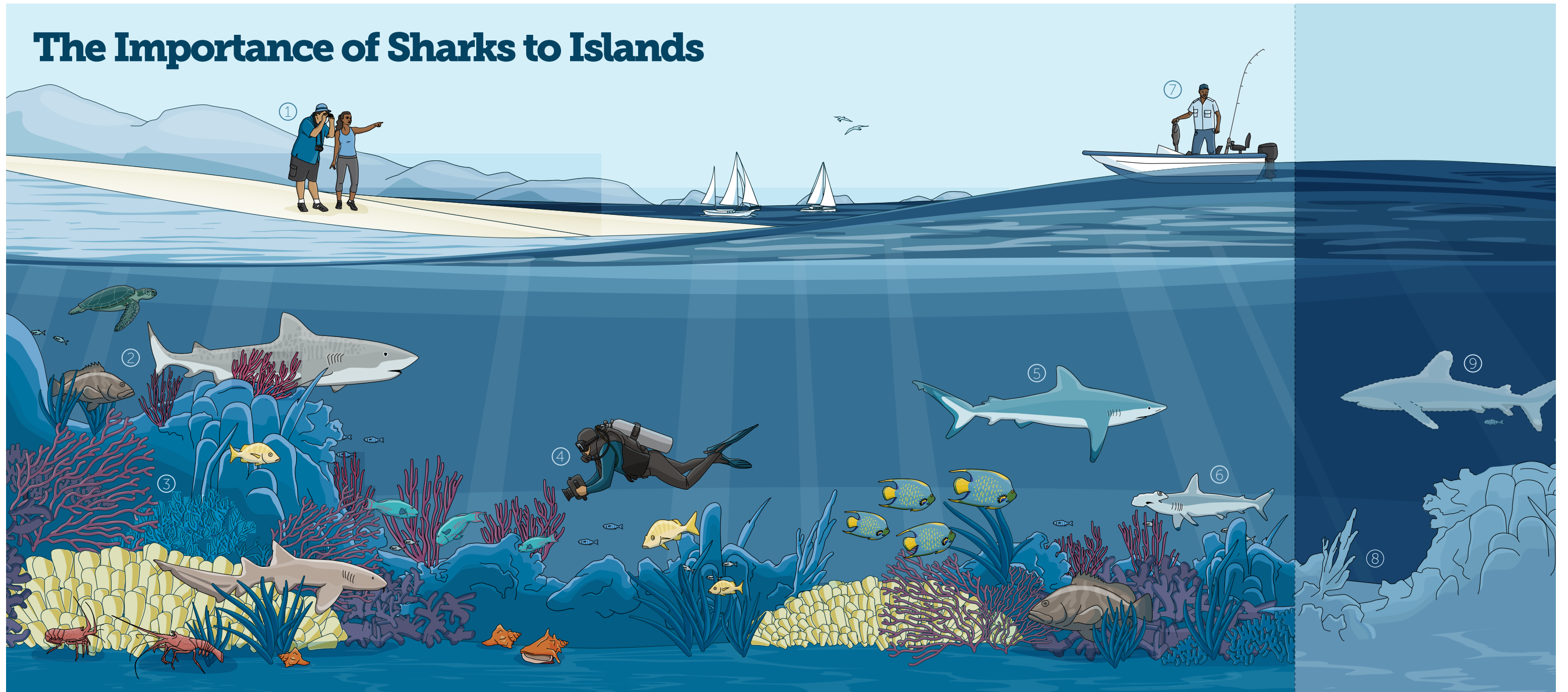
Sharks need our help. Many of the 509 species swimming in the ocean today are not equipped to withstand the growing number of human-related threats they face.

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 populations closer to extinction.

In May 2014, the British Virgin Islands took a leading role among Caribbean governments by creating a shark and ray sanctuary in its exclusive economic zone. Commercial fishing of sharks and rays is now prohibited across 80,117 square kilometers (30,933 square miles) of these waters, which are home to at least 23 species of sharks, including tiger, hammerhead, and oceanic whitetip. This action serves as a model for shark conservation that can spread across the region.

The British Virgin Islands has joined The Bahamas and Honduras, both of which declared shark sanctuaries in 2011, as the first Caribbean governments to implement protections. By committing to these comprehensive and permanent conservation measures, the territory has established itself as a global leader in protecting these predators, which are vital to the health of the oceans.

# The Importance of Sharks to Islands



**1 Healthy reefs drive economies**

Reefs are also vital to tourism. They provide much of the white sand for the beaches we love, and attract divers, snorkelers, sailing and yachting enthusiasts, and recreational fishers.

**2 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.

**3 Healthy reefs need sharks**

Science now shows that sharks help maintain the health of coral reefs.<sup>1</sup>

**4 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.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, the value of a dead shark is estimated at about US\$108.

**5 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.

**6 Not just fins**

Approximately 100 million sharks are killed every year in commercial fisheries.<sup>3</sup> Products include fins, meat, skins, liver oil, and jaws.

**7 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.

**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**

More than half of all shark and ray species are predicted to be threatened or near threatened with extinction due to overfishing.<sup>4</sup>

## Defining the shark and ray sanctuary regulations

The waters off the British Virgin Islands have been declared a shark and ray sanctuary. That means all commercial fishing of sharks and rays is prohibited throughout the territory's exclusive economic zone.

As of May 19, 2014, the following actions are prohibited within the British Virgin Islands and its waters:

- Intentional fishing for sharks.
- The sale, export, import, or possession of sharks, rays, or shark and ray products, including meat and fins.
- Intentional removal of the fins or tail of a shark.
- Intentional injury of a shark or a ray.
- Intentional feeding of sharks or rays or use of food to attract them.

If a shark is unintentionally caught, it must be released, dead or alive. Licensed local fishermen may still catch sharks for personal food, although they may not sell any parts. At no time can great and scalloped hammerheads, or any other sharks that are endangered, be retained even if caught by licensed local fishermen. Violators face a maximum fine of US\$1,000 per shark.

Healthy commercial fish stocks need healthy coral reefs, and healthy reefs need sharks. By establishing this shark sanctuary, the British Virgin Islands is acting to strengthen the resilience of its marine environment and secure industries that depend on a healthy ocean.

## Endnotes

- 1 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>.
- 2 GMS 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/Palaeconomicanalysisforsharks.pdf](http://www.pewtrusts.org/-/media/Imported-and-Legacy/uploadedfiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/reports/protecting_ocean_life/Palaeconomicanalysisforsharks.pdf).
- 3 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>.
- 4 Nicholas K. Dulvy et al., "Extinction Risk and Conservation of the World's Sharks and Rays," *eLife* 3 (2014): e00590, doi:10.7554/eLife.00590, <http://elifesciences.org/content/3/e00590>.

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