

## ***FAST FACTS: Sharks & the Baltic Region***

### **Distribution:**

- Contrary to popular belief, there are sharks in the Baltic Sea.
- In fact, 31 species of sharks and closely related skates, rays and chimaeras (collectively known as cartilaginous fishes) have been recorded in this area.
- These species are found primarily in the Western Baltic and the transitional areas of the Skagerrak and Kattegat (included in this analysis).
- The most common species of shark in the Baltic are the spurdog (spiny dogfish), the thorny skate, and the small-spotted catshark.
- Also found are blue and porbeagle sharks, blackmouth dogfish, thornback rays and bluntnose sixgill sharks and the “common” varieties of skate, stingray and angel shark.
- Even the immense, filter-feeding basking shark, which can grow up to 10m long, is found here.
- There are single records of the wide-ranging oceanic whitetip shark (Swedish Gullmarsfjorden in 2004) and the smooth hammerhead (Danish Kattegat in 1937).

### **Catches:**

- In 2006, 419 tonnes (t) of sharks, rays and chimaeras were reported as catch from the Baltic Sea.
- Of this catch, 177t was taken by **Sweden**, 158t by **Norway**, 81t by **Denmark** and 3t by **Germany**.
- "Spurdog make up 79% of Baltic cartilaginous fish landings. Catches from the overall NE Atlantic spurdog population have declined by 90% since the 1970s."
- The annual catch of spurdog from the Baltic in the late-1980s is roughly equivalent to the amount that can be legally taken from all EU waters today (2,500t).
- Vessels from **Estonia, Lithuania, Germany** and **Norway** vessels take significant amounts of spiny dogfish, rays and deepsea sharks from the North Atlantic (outside the Baltic).
- Since 2001, 12t of the once-discarded rabbitfish (the only Baltic chimaera) have been taken from Baltic waters by vessels from **Denmark**.

### **Markets & Trade:**

- Sharks are sought for their meat (for food), their fins (used in the Asian delicacy, *shark fin soup*) and liver oil (used in cosmetics, lubricants and pharmaceuticals).
- Shark hides can be used for leather while shark cartilage is an unproven but popular alternative treatment for human disease.

- In 2006, **Germany, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Sweden** and **Norway** imported 1,847t of shark products (mostly meat from spurdog and catsharks) from other countries.
- **Denmark** reports the highest imports of sharks (1,025t in 2006) of all Baltic countries. Germany (537t) and Sweden (206t) follow, but Germany appears to under-report to the EU database.
- In fact, other databases reveal **Germany** as the world's largest importer of frozen spurdog meat since the late 1990s, receiving one quarter of American exports and a fifth of Canadian.

### Safeguards:

- As is the case in the rest of the EU, there are very few limits on the catch of Baltic sharks and rays. Numerous national, regional and international conservation tools are under-utilised.
- **Sweden** is the only Baltic country to adopt national rules to protect species of sharks and rays.
- The EU has banned “finning” (slicing off a shark’s valuable fins and tossing the body overboard) by prohibiting the removal of fins at sea. A derogation, however, allows Member States to issue special permits for onboard fin removal under lenient, poorly enforced rules.
- Germany and Lithuania are the only Baltic countries to have issued these problematic permits.
- Spurdog catches from the Baltic were limited for just one year (2007). Last year, only the Baltic region was removed from the EU areas in which spurdog limits are in place.
- EU porbeagle catches were not limited until 2008. Limits are not low enough to restrict fishing.
- Since 2003, **Germany** has been the world’s leading proponent of limiting international trade in commercially valuable sharks. Their proposals to list spurdog and porbeagle under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) were voted down in 2004 and 2007.

### Biology:

- Specialized organs and processes in sharks and rays allow them to adapt to the ever-changing salinity levels of the Baltic.
- Processing low salinity water, however, requires much energy, making it impossible for sharks and rays to live for extensive periods in the far northern and eastern parts of the Baltic Sea.
- For similar reasons, sharks and rays appear to leave the Baltic to lay eggs and give birth.
- Sharks and rays generally grow slowly, mature late, live for a long time, and have only a few young after a lengthy gestation period. This makes them particularly vulnerable to overfishing.
- For example, spurdog can live 60 years or longer. Females mature in their teenage years, remain pregnant for up to two years, and give birth to only about six pups per litter.

### Status:

- Eleven of 30 Baltic shark and ray species (37%) are listed by IUCN as *Threatened* with extinction.

- Eight out of the 18 Baltic sharks (44%) are considered *Threatened* with extinction.
- The spurdog, porbeagle, common skate, and angel shark are considered *Critically Endangered*.

**Hope:**

- Proposals for Baltic spurdog and porbeagle 2009 fishing limits are being developed now and will be decided in December. Scientists advise no fishing on these depleted populations.
- The European Commission will complete an EU Plan of Action for Sharks by December 2008.
- This plan can set the stage for sound fishing limits, endangered species protection, and a stronger finning ban, but support from conservation-minded Member States is needed to balance opposition from fishing interests.