

Oceanic Whitetip Sharks

(*Carcharhinus longimanus*)

The Case for Listing on CMS Appendix I



Photo © Jim Abernethy

Once-abundant oceanic whitetip sharks have been severely overfished on a global scale. CMS Appendix I listing is warranted to bolster other conservation commitments and provide added impetus for international cooperation toward effective protection and recovery.

Distribution

The oceanic whitetip shark is found around the world, generally offshore in tropical and sub-tropical waters. This top predator prefers surface seas, but has been reported to depths of more than 1000 meters.

Overexploitation

Oceanic whitetip sharks are taken primarily as bycatch in pelagic longline and purse seine fisheries that target tuna and swordfish. Catches are likely under-reported. The species has a relatively good chance of surviving capture on longlines, if carefully released.

Demand for shark fins (for use in a celebratory soup) is a driving force behind oceanic whitetip shark mortality, although the meat is sometimes kept for food.

Oceanic whitetip sharks are exceptionally vulnerable to overfishing due to:

- Late maturity (females mature as late as age nine)
- Lengthy gestation (nine months to a year)
- Few young (average of six pups in alternate years).

Population Status

Steep declines in oceanic whitetip shark abundance have been documented for all oceans. In 2019, the IUCN classified the species as globally Critically Endangered with a decreasing trend, based on a global population reduction estimate of >98%.

Migratory Patterns

The oceanic whitetip shark is one of the most migratory of pelagic sharks, with all major tagging studies conducted worldwide showing cyclical, predictable migrations across multiple national boundaries, and onto the high seas.

Conservation Measures

Concern over oceanic whitetip shark depletion has been a key factor in the species' listing in Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) and retention bans through the four major tuna-focused Regional Fisheries Management Organizations (tRFMOs), as well as inclusion in Annex I of the CMS Memorandum of Understanding on the Conservation of Migratory Sharks.

Implementation of associated obligations, however, has been seriously lacking. Many tRFMO Parties have yet to implement species-specific oceanic whitetip shark protections and substantial trade in oceanic whitetip fins continues.



Call to Action

Our organizations ask CMS Parties to support the proposal to list the oceanic whitetip shark on CMS Appendix I to promote the expansion and coordination of urgently needed protections.

Accordingly, and consistent with other conservation commitments, we urge each Party to immediately ban all oceanic whitetip shark retention and to engage in regional recovery initiatives for the species.

Inadequate Implementation: Cause for Continued Alarm

The sharks already listed under CMS remain insufficiently protected

Sharks and rays are inherently vulnerable and particularly threatened. Many species are fished across multiple jurisdictions, making international agreements key to population health. CMS Parties are obligated to strictly protect Appendix I-listed species, and work internationally toward conservation of those listed on Appendix II. Most CMS Parties, however, continue to fall short in this regard. The 2018 report, [Sharks Ahead](#), documented national and regional actions for 29 CMS-listed shark and ray species and concluded that listing is outpacing implementation of Parties' vital commitments.

[Sharks Ahead](#) covers CMS Parties' domestic conservation measures for the shark and ray species listed under CMS Appendix I prior to 2017: great white shark, all five sawfishes, both manta rays, all nine devil rays, and the basking shark. Only 28% of Parties were found to be meeting all of their obligations under CMS to strictly protect Appendix I-listed species in their waters.

The authors also found inadequate regional progress through fisheries bodies for the sharks and rays listed on Appendix II during the same time period: whale shark, porbeagle, northern hemisphere spiny dogfish, both makos, all three threshers, two hammerheads, and the silky shark.

Parties' inaction squanders great potential for CMS to enhance shark and ray conservation globally. Although we support adding the Critically Endangered oceanic whitetip shark to Appendix I at CoP13, we urge Parties to focus on effective implementation of listings, including existing obligations for the many sharks and rays listed at past COPs. In particular, overfishing must be directly addressed to secure a brighter future for these vulnerable, valuable species. The following examples are particularly urgent:



Above left: Mako shark © Greg Somal Above right: Sawfish © Anthony Planas

Mako Sharks

Although the shortfin mako was listed under CMS Appendix II in 2008, the species is still not subject to international fishing quotas and is headed for collapse in the North Atlantic. In 2017 and 2019, scientists for the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) recommended a North Atlantic retention ban and a South Atlantic catch limit. This advice has been proposed by Senegal, Angola, Egypt, Gabon, Honduras, Liberia, Libya, and Panama, among others, with support from Guinea Bissau, Norway, and Uruguay. The European Union opposed this science-based approach. Brazil, Morocco, and South Africa have yet to announce a position. The proposal will be revisited in July 2020.

Sawfish

The sawfishes are among most endangered of all shark and ray species, and at serious risk for extinction off East Africa. Action and assistance to implement sawfish protections are urgently needed in Kenya (the lead proponent of the 2014 Appendix I listing) as well as Mozambique and Madagascar.

To address these and other crises, our organizations underscore the call for CMS Parties to ensure:

- Strict protections for all Appendix I-listed sharks and rays
- Concrete fishing limits for Appendix II-listed species
- Improved data on shark and ray catches and trade
- Greater engagement and investment in CMS shark and ray focused initiatives
- Research, education, and enforcement programs to maximize effectiveness of measures, and
- Financial, technical, and legal assistance to help developing countries meet their commitments.

The full report (*Sharks Ahead: Realizing the Potential of the Convention on Migratory Species to Conserve Elasmobranchs*) [is available here](#).