

White-spotted Wedgefish (*Rhynchobatus australiae*)

Proposed action: Inclusion on CMS Appendix II
Proponent: Philippines



Overview

White-spotted wedgefish are often caught as bycatch due to their susceptibility to different types of fishing gear, but they are also targeted in commercial fisheries because their fins are some of the most valuable in the trade. The declining population of the species has made studying its migration patterns difficult, however recent data shows episodic migrations between Indonesia and Australia, as well as other areas throughout the species' range. The IUCN Red List categorizes the population as Vulnerable, due to local population declines. The combination of the species' value, susceptibility as bycatch, and the difficulties of monitoring due to a recent reclassification of the species necessitates listing the white-spotted wedgefish on CMS Appendix II.

Biology and Distribution

The white-spotted wedgefsh is migratory and found in coastal inshore habitats in Southeast Asia and Australia. They are large benthopelagic shark-like batoids that are differentiated from other wedgefsh species by their bottle-shaped snout. Like other species in the guitarfish family, the wedgefsh is a bottom dweller and feeds on benthic invertebrates, crustaceans and small bottom-dwelling fish.

The white-spotted wedgefsh occurs in Southeast Asia and Australia, ranging from Thailand, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Indonesia to the Australian sub-tropics. It is the only widespread *Rhynchobatus* species throughout the central Indo-West Pacific and occurs more widely than was previously recorded, with samples located as far east as Fiji and as far west as India.

Understanding the species' migratory patterns is hindered by declining population sizes, which creates uncertainty regarding the extent to which the current population migrates across country boundaries. Studying their migration patterns is also difficult due to prior taxonomic confusion among species of wedgefsh. Recent data show however, that there is likely episodic migration of the white-spotted wedgefsh between Indonesia and Australia. Similar migrations are likely occurring throughout this species' range.

Population Status and Threats

Rhynchobatidae is among the most threatened families of Chondrichthyans, and *R. australiae* is especially vulnerable because of its use of coastal habitats, susceptibility to multiple gear types, large size, and value in the shark fin trade. This species is heavily exploited in Southeast Asia for its fins, which are considered some of the most valuable shark fins in the trade.

There are no quantitative abundance estimates for *R. australiae* throughout its range. The IUCN Red List classifies the current population trend as decreasing and Vulnerable. Species specific information has been difficult to collect due to recent taxonomic revisions within the

genus. *Rhynchobatus* occurring in the Indo-West Pacific were all considered *R. djiddensis* prior to the late 1990's when five separate species were either reinstated or newly described. Catch has been recorded as *Rhynchobatus*, which is problematic for proper management of species that are rare or restricted to certain habitats.

Uses

The white-spotted wedgefsh is in high demand in the shark fin trade because its fins are very valuable. This trait has led to overexploitation of the species in Southeast Asia. This species is also frequently caught as bycatch and their use of inshore habitat and susceptibility to multiple gear types makes them particularly vulnerable considering their range is located in some of the world's most heavily fished coastal regions. The species is caught by artisanal and commercial fisheries both as a target species and as bycatch in demersal trawl, net, and longline fisheries.

Conservation Measures

Currently, there are no management measures in place for this species in any range states. Although non-binding, the Philippines has developed a National Plan of Action (NPOA) for sharks, which aims to provide a guide for the sustainable utilization and conservation of sharks in its waters. There are no formal programs dedicated specifically to monitoring wedgefsh catches and populations.

Expert Advice

The Scientific Council finds that the white-spotted wedgefsh is clearly subject to high fishing pressure throughout its range. It recommends that the species should be listed if more data about the species' migratory patterns is provided. The IUCN Red List assessments of other guitarfish show that the group is generally migratory. If more data is not available, the Council recommends listing the wider taxonomic group. In addition, the proposal from the Philippines suggests including the white-spotted wedgefsh in the CMS Sharks MOU.

CALL TO ACTION

Benefits from listing this species under CMS Appendix II depend on concrete follow-up actions. If properly implemented, listing the *Rhynchobatus australiae* could:

- improve protection and encourage actions to prevent overfishing;
- help mitigate obstacles to its migration and preserve its habitat; and
- facilitate regional cooperation toward conservation of shared populations and key habitats.

We urge CMS Parties to support inclusion of the *Rhynchobatus australiae* on CMS Appendix II at CoP12.

References

Information in this fact sheet is based on the CMS listing proposal and relevant IUCN Red List assessments.