



What is shark finning and why is it harmful?

Shark finning is defined as the onboard removal of a shark's fins and the discarding of the body at sea. This practice poses a significant threat to many shark stocks and to the health of marine ecosystems. It is also a threat to traditional fisheries and to food security in some low-income countries.

A threat to sharks

Tens of millions of sharks are finned every year. Once the shark has been discarded, the fins can be dried on deck, eliminating the need for freezer space. It is therefore inherently unsustainable, since it allows fishers to catch an almost unlimited number of sharks.

This greatly increases the threat to sharks and, by removing large numbers of top predators from marine ecosystems, is likely to have dramatic and negative impacts on other species, including commercially-important species. Predictive modelling has shown that the removal of sharks from their ecosystems can have unpredictable and often devastating impacts on other species.

Sharks are highly vulnerable to over-exploitation, owing to their slow growth, long gestation and low reproductive output. Over-exploited shark stocks can take years or even decades to recover. Some European shark fisheries that were closed fifty years ago remain so, as the populations have yet to recover. The threat of over-exploitation is exacerbated by the lengthy migrations undertaken by many shark species. Even if they are protected in one area, sharks can move into areas where they are not subject to protection.

A threat to shark management

Gathering and analysing catch data is the *sine qua non* of shark conservation. It is difficult and, in some cases, impossible to identify a shark species solely by inspecting its fins. The mass finning of sharks precludes the possibility of gathering accurate data on shark catches by species and, thereby, of carrying out stock assessments and implementing shark management regimes.

A threat to food security

Sharks are a valuable source of protein for millions of impoverished coastal people. The discarding of shark bodies is an unacceptable waste. Research carried out in Latin America, Africa and India shows that small-scale fishers have suffered sizeable reductions in their shark catches since the arrival of large foreign vessels and the globalisation of the fin trade. The fin trade has created millionaires in Asia, but contributes little to sustainable development in low- and middle-income countries.



Shark population declines

One-third of European sharks are threatened with extinction¹ and 32% of pelagic (open-ocean) sharks are assessed as Threatened (6% classified as Endangered and 26% as Vulnerable) on a global basis. A further 24% are Near-Threatened.² Studies also show drastic declines in specific shark populations:

- 89% decline in hammerhead sharks in the northwest Atlantic in the last 15 years³
- 65% decline in tiger sharks in the northwest Atlantic⁴
- 79% decline in great white sharks in the northwest Atlantic⁵
- 80% decline in thresher sharks in the northwest Atlantic⁶

References

¹ Fordham, S., Fowler, S.L., Coelho, R., Goldman, K.J. & Francis, M. 2006. *Squalus acanthias*. In: IUCN 2009. IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. Version 2009.1. www.iucnredlist.org

² The Conservation Status of Pelagic Sharks and Rays. Report of the IUCN Shark Specialist Group Pelagic Shark Red List Workshop. Tubney House, University of Oxford, UK, 19–23 February 2007
http://www.iucnssg.org/tl_files/Assets/pdf/Reports/SSG%20pelagic_report_final.pdf

³⁻⁶ Baum, J. K. *et al.* Collapse and conservation of shark populations in the Northwest Atlantic. *Science*, 299, 389 - 392, (2003)
<http://www.cfr.washington.edu/classes/esrm.450/Baum2003.pdf>