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 Responsibility

Bangladesh moves to protect threatened sharks and rays

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By Lisa Jackson

Government amends legislation to reduce the species' extinction

With oceanic shark and ray populations dwindling, Bangladesh is implementing policy changes to safeguard sharks and rays in the Bay of Bengal. Announced earlier this week, the Government of Bangladesh is updating the list of species and species groups under the Wildlife (Conservation and Security) Act, 2012. Calling it a “critical step,” officials say that the improved legislation will help reduce the extinction risk of sharks and rays.

“This amendment empowers the Forest Department and other law enforcement agencies to be proactive in protecting some of the world’s most threatened marine wildlife,” said Chief Conservator of Forests Mr. Md. Amir Hosain Chowdhury. “At the same time, it provides a framework for the sustainable exploitation of non-threatened species for the benefit of local fishing communities.”

The revised list strictly protects eight genera and 23 shark and ray species, while allowing the sustainable exploitation, consumption and trade of one genus and 29 species if their catch is found to be non-detrimental to wild populations. With the changes, Bangladesh becomes the first country to place all guitarfish (*Rhinobatidae*) and wedgefish (*Rhynchobatus*) under strict legal protection. Support from the Shark Conservation Fund and the Pew Charitable Trusts Global Shark Conservation Project enabled the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) to assist the Government of Bangladesh with the



Overfishing is the biggest threat to sharks and rays, which are important for healthy marine ecosystems. Photo courtesy of Wildlife Conservation Society.

formulation of the amendment.

“This updated list prepared by the Forest Department in consultation with the Department of Fisheries and national and international experts, and with technical support from the Wildlife Conservation Society, incorporates new information on sharks and rays in Bangladesh and builds on the country’s international, regional and constitutional commitment to protect threatened marine wildlife and their habitats,” says Conservator of Forests Mollah Rezaul Karim of the Wildlife and Nature Conservation Circle.

Bangladesh is a global hotspot for sharks and rays. Between 2016 and 2019, the WCS citizen scientist network recorded more than two million sharks and 200,000 rays at eight fish landing sites in coastal Bangladesh. Among these sharks and rays, eight critically endangered species were identified. Officials say that unless conservation efforts are intensified, many species are at risk for extinction.

“More than half of the 116 shark and ray species confirmed or suspected to occur in Bangladesh are threatened with extinction,” said Chowdhury.

"In Japan, aquaculture is deployed in the defense of endangered species**(<https://www.globalseafood.org/advocate/in-japan-aquaculture-is-deployed-in-the-defense-of-endangered-species/>).**Global populations of sharks and rays have **declined by 71 percent since 1970**

(<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-020-03173-9>), with overfishing identified as a key culprit behind the drop. Sharks and rays are coveted for their fins, gill plates and skins, which are exported to international markets such as China. According to official government statistics, up to 2,000 tonnes (2,200 tons) of dried shark fins are exported from Bangladesh each year, earning over (U.S.) \$1 million dollars in tax revenue.

"The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) regulates the international trade of sharks and rays," said Mr. A.S.M Jahir Uddin Akon, Director of the Wildlife Crime Control Unit of the Forest Department. "The convention prohibits trade in three species of sawfish that still occur in Bangladesh. The convention also requires an official permit from the Forest Department to export 25 other shark and ray species that occur in Bangladesh. These permits can only be issued if there is strong evidence that their trade will not harm wild populations."

Education will also play a role in the conservation initiative. With support from Blue Resources Trust and Pew, WCS Bangladesh Program has launched a traveling exhibition to educate government officials and the public about the extinction threat and the importance of protecting sharks and rays.

A radio series produced by WCS will also be broadcast throughout Bangladesh's coastal region, showcasing "the unique features of whale sharks, hammerhead and thresher sharks, manta rays and sawfish and how these threatened species can be saved from extinction."

"Enforcement of these regulations must go hand-in-hand with promoting the live release of protected species and improving our understanding of the ecological benefits of sustainable fisheries," said Dr. Md. Sharif Uddin, Director (Marine) of the Department of Fisheries. "If fishers, traders, and consumers understand that by protecting threatened sharks and rays, they are also safeguarding their livelihoods and food security, Bangladesh can turn the tide from the overexploitation to sustainable conservation management."

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Author



LISA JACKSON

Associate Editor Lisa Jackson lives in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada. Her work has been featured in Al Jazeera News, The Globe & Mail, The Independent, and The Toronto Star.

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