



Guardians of the Deep: Protecting South Africa's Sharks and Rays

South Africa's Diverse Marine Life

South Africa is home to an extraordinary diversity of marine life, including over two hundred species of sharks and rays. Among these, South Africa boasts 117 shark species and 96 ray species, making its waters one of the richest and most varied marine ecosystems in the world. These species range from the well-known Great White shark to the less familiar but equally fascinating endemic species like the Puffadder Shy shark and the Izak Catshark.

Major Threats to Sharks and Rays

Sharks and rays in South Africa face numerous threats, primarily from overfishing, bycatch, habitat destruction, and pollution. The demand for shark fins, meat, and liver oil drives illegal fishing practices, while rays are often caught unintentionally by trawlers and longline fisheries. Coastal development and pollution further degrade their habitats, reducing breeding grounds and food availability.





Vulnerability and Conservation Status

Many shark and ray species are listed as vulnerable, endangered, or near threatened due to their slow reproductive rates and late maturity. Species such as the Great White shark (*Carcharodon carcharias*) and the Scalloped Hammerhead (*Sphyrna lewini*) are particularly at risk. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List includes several South African shark and ray species under these categories, highlighting the urgent need for conservation efforts.

Extinct Species and Conservation Successes

Some shark species have already been lost. The Daggernose Shark (*Isogomphodon oxyrinchus*), for instance, is now considered extinct in certain regions. However, there have been conservation successes. The implementation of strict fishing regulations and the establishment of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) have shown positive effects. The Spotted Ragged-tooth shark (*Carcharias taurus*), once heavily fished, has shown signs of population recovery due to these protective measures.

High Endemic Species

South Africa is home to several high endemic species, including the Puffadder Shy shark (*Haploblepharus edwardsii*), the Izak Catshark (*Holohalaelurus regani*), and the Natal Shy shark (*Haploblepharus kistnasamyi*). These species are found nowhere else in the world and highlight the unique biodiversity of South Africa's marine environment.





How Ordinary People Can Help

Ordinary people can play a vital role in shark and ray conservation through several actions:

- **Support Sustainable Seafood:** Choose seafood from sustainable sources and avoid products that contribute to overfishing and bycatch.
- **Participate in Citizen Science:** Engage in programs that track and report shark and ray sightings to contribute to research and conservation efforts.
- **Advocate for MPAs:** Support the creation and enforcement of Marine Protected Areas, which provide safe habitats for marine life to breed and thrive.
- **Reduce Pollution:** Minimize plastic use and participate in beach clean-ups to protect the marine environment from pollution.

Connection to Marine Protected Areas (MPAs)

Marine Protected Areas are crucial for the survival of sharks and rays. These regions restrict human activities like fishing and coastal development, offering a sanctuary where marine species can recover and flourish. South Africa's network of MPAs, including areas like the Tsitsikamma National Park and the Aliwal Shoal, have proven effective in safeguarding marine biodiversity. Continued expansion and enforcement of these protected zones are essential for the long-term conservation of sharks and rays.





South Africa's sharks and rays are invaluable to its marine ecosystem, yet they face significant threats that endanger their survival. Through sustainable practices, citizen involvement, and robust conservation policies, especially the establishment and maintenance of MPAs, we can ensure these majestic creatures continue to thrive in our oceans. Together, we can be the guardians of the deep, protecting the rich marine life that makes South Africa's coastal waters unique and vibrant.

Links to some articles:

<https://www.iucnssg.org/news/curious-about-what-shark-species-occur-in-south-africa>.

<https://www.oceansafrica.com/sharks-of-south-africa/>.

<https://oceanographicmagazine.com/features/in-search-of-sharks-in-south-africa/>.

