

Conservation News

Turning the tide for sharks: Important Shark and Ray Areas

Two years after the Important Shark and Ray Areas project was launched, nearly two-thirds (63.8%) of global marine waters have been examined and 4.3% are identified as critical habitats for the persistence of sharks, rays and chimaeras (hereafter sharks). Although the initiative has been a turning point for the conservation of sharks, bold actions are required to safeguard the future of these species. More than one-third of sharks are categorized as threatened on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. Over the last century, fisheries have had a large and cumulative impact on sharks and this threat is being compounded by habitat loss and climate change. Area-based conservation can play a critical role in reversing population declines by reducing mortality, increasing resilience, providing refuge from threats, and supporting population recovery. Important Shark and Ray Areas are now equipping resource managers with the information needed to incorporate sharks into conservation planning.

As of January 2025, Important Shark and Ray Areas have been delineated in six of the 13 regions worldwide: Central and South American Pacific, Mediterranean and Black Seas, Western Indian Ocean, Asia, Polar Waters, and New Zealand and Pacific Islands. So far, 868 scientists, citizen scientists, fishers and resource managers have been engaged in the identification process and contributed to the delineation of 590 Important Shark and Ray Areas incorporating 327 species (one-quarter of all shark species globally). Important Shark and Ray Areas factsheets, spatial layers and regional compendiums are available at sharkrayareas.org/e-atlas. Over 210 spatial data requests have been received from 51 jurisdictions, and Important Shark and Ray Areas are increasingly featured in scientific publications. Important Shark and Ray Areas have been incorporated into other area-based conservation approaches such as the Nosy Be Important Shark and Ray Area being recognized as a Key Biodiversity Area. Parties to the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals adopted a decision to engage with the

Important Shark and Ray Areas process and consider identified areas in their spatial planning and conservation action (including when updating National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans). In line with their growing use in conservation efforts, grant making initiatives are also now increasingly prioritizing Important Shark and Ray Areas.

The most recent Important Shark and Ray Areas workshop was held in January 2025 to assess critical habitats in the South American Atlantic and South American Inland Waters regions. The assessment of the remaining five regions (European Atlantic, North America and Caribbean Atlantic, African Atlantic, Australia and Southeast Indian Ocean, and North American Pacific) is intended for completion by 2027. This timeline will ensure resource managers and policy makers are provided with the information needed to consider sharks in conservation planning when meeting their political commitments under Target 3 of the Convention on Biological Diversity Global Biodiversity Framework to protect 30% of land and sea by 2030. Through a global, collaborative and open-access process, Important Shark and Ray Areas are bringing attention to the conservation needs of sharks and providing evidence-based information to ensure the long-term survival of these iconic species.

ASIA O. ARMSTRONG^{1,2}  (ahaines@usc.edu.au),
AMANDA BATLLE-MORERA¹ , VANESSA BETTCHER BRITO¹ ,
RYAN CHARLES¹ , EMILIANO GARCÍA-RODRÍGUEZ¹ ,
ADRIANA GONZALEZ-PESTANA^{1,3} , PETER M. KYNE^{1,3} ,
GIUSEPPE NOTARBARTOLO DI SCIARA^{1,4} , MARTA D. PALACIOS¹ ,
CHRISTOPH A. ROHNER¹  and RIMA W. JABADO¹ 
¹IUCN Species Survival Commission Shark Specialist Group, Dubai, United Arab Emirates. ²School of Science, Technology, and Engineering, University of the Sunshine Coast, Queensland, Australia. ³Charles Darwin University, Darwin, Australia. ⁴IUCN Marine Mammal Protected Areas Task Force, Gland, Switzerland

This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).