

# Sharks and rays to be given new international protections

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Guitarfish are one of the newly protected species

**Countries have agreed to strengthen protections for 18 threatened species of sharks and rays, including those hunted for their meat and fins.**

The proposal was passed at the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) on Sunday.

The newly protected species include mako sharks, wedgefishes and guitarfishes.

A demand for shark fin soup is one of the driving factors in the depleting numbers of sharks in the ocean.

The proposal, which was tabled by Mexico and requires ratification this week, means that the species can no longer be traded unless it can be proven that their fishing will not impact the possibility of their survival.

The number of sharks killed each year in commercial fisheries is estimated at 100 million, with a range between 63 million and 273 million, according to The Pew Trust.

Makos, the fastest shark species, have almost disappeared completely from the Mediterranean and numbers are diminishing rapidly in the Atlantic, Northern Pacific and Indian oceans.

Although 102 countries voted in favour of the move, 40 - including China, Iceland, Japan, Malaysia and New Zealand - opposed it.

Some argued that there was not enough evidence to show that mako sharks were disappearing as a result of fishing.

## Sharks and rays: The facts on the "rhinos of the seas"

A group of 16 very unusual animals called wedgefish and guitarfish, together known as rhino rays

They are assessed as the most threatened family of marine fish - all but one is critically endangered

Two of the wedgefish species may already have been driven to extinction by commercial fisheries

Wedgefish have two large dorsal fins and a large tail lobe, prized for use in soup.

Ali Hood, director of conservation at Shark Trust, welcomed the move.

"Mako are highly valued for their meat and fins. Decades of unrestricted overfishing, particularly on the high seas, has led to significant population declines," Ms Hood told the BBC.

The "listing would be critical for ensuring that international trade is held to sustainable levels, prompting urgently needed catch limits and improving traceability", she added.

## World's strangest sharks and rays 'on brink of extinction'

By Helen Briggs

BBC News

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comments



The biggest threat to angel sharks is commercial fishing

**Some of the world's most unusual sharks and rays are on the brink of extinction because of threats such as commercial fishing, scientists have said.**

A shark that uses its tail to stun prey and a ray half the length of a bus are on the list of 50 species.

The scientists say sharks have a bad image and people do not understand how important and threatened they are.

And losing even one of these "living fossils" would wipe out millions of years of evolutionary history.

"The biggest myth around sharks is definitely the perception that they are dangerous, that they are man-eating machines - they're not," marine biologist Fran Cabada told BBC News.

"There have been some negative interactions recorded but they are very infrequent and they're not intentional."



Despite their fearsome teeth, sand tiger sharks usually attack humans only in self-defence

This is the first time sharks, rays and chimeras (fish with cartilage in place of bones) have been assessed for the Edge (**Evolutionarily Distinct and Globally Endangered**) of Existence programme.

Most sharks are at the top of the food chain, which makes them crucial to the health of the oceans.

Losing them would have a big impact on other fish populations and, ultimately, human livelihoods.

"They have very few relatives on the tree of life, so they are very unique and losing them will actually represent a big, big loss," said Fran Cabada.

The assessment found fishing, both targeted and accidental, was to blame for the steep decline in many of these populations, together with habitat loss due to coastal development, degradation of mangrove forests, water pollution and trawling.

"The Edge sharks and rays list comprises some of the most interesting and unique fish we have on this planet," said Dr Matthew Gollock, of ZSL.

"The modern extinction of a single species from this list would cause the loss of millions of years of evolutionary history."

Here are some of the species on the list:

### The largetooth sawfish (*Pristis pristis*)



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This ray ranks first on the list. It is at risk from unsustainable fishing and being unintentionally caught in nets. The largetooth sawfish's most distinctive feature is its snout (rostrum) lined with sharp teeth to slash its prey. Cowboy boots were once made from sawfish skin.

### The Caribbean electric ray (*Narcine bancroftii*)



This ray can produce an electric shock, which it uses to stun its prey. The fish hide in sand or mud during the day and forage for worms and other small prey at night.

### The zebra shark (*Stegostoma fasciatum*)



This shark changes in appearance over its lifetime. The young are born with zebra stripes, which change to spots as they get older. It lives on the sea floor, and has a lifespan of 25 to 35 years.

### The whale shark (*Rhincodon typus*)



The biggest fish in the sea, reaching up to 20m (65ft) in length, it is a filter feeder, relying on plankton and small fishes to survive.

### The basking shark (*Cetorhinus maximus*)



The basking shark is the second largest species of shark (and fish) in the world behind the enormous whale shark.