

Threatened shark biodiversity in the Bay of Bengal, Bangladesh: conservation needs

Opinion

Bay of Bengal is one of the most heavily shark fishing regions in the world ocean. The major shark hunting grounds of Bangladesh include the coastal waters of Kuakata, Sonar Char, Ruper Char, Fatrar Char, Char Gongmoti and Dublar Char in Patuakhali and Ashar Char, Patharghata Barguna, the Sunderbans, Sandwip, Kutubdia, Moheshkhali, Cox's Bazar and Teknaf. In the recent years, shark hunting has increased from the Bay of Bengal, Bangladesh which creates threats to the ecology in the Bay. A group of dry fish traders allegedly patronizing shark hunting, processing and trading in country as it's a very lucrative business. Different shark nets are used to catch shark species from the coastal regions of Bangladesh although sharks are also caught as a by catch. More and more fishermen are being attracted to shark netting as it is more profitable than catching other varieties of sea fish. News about shark catch has become a common phenomenon in the daily newspapers of Bangladesh but not in the electronic media. Major landing centers of sharks are Cox's Bazar, Teknaf, Chittagong, Khulna, Kuakata, Dublar char, Patharghata, Barisal and some small markets along the coasts. It has been found that most landed shark species in these landing centers are smaller in size. Dog shark (*Scoliodon laticaudus*) has been the most common shark species landed in BFDC Fish harbor, Cox's Bazar. Fishermen are not aware about the harmful impacts of catching smaller size sharks. Sharks are found to be seen dead in different areas with no one claiming about the ownership. Although sharks are continuingly being processed in the country but shark trade data in the official statistics do not reflect that. Large proportion of exploited shark is estimated to be discarded and unreported. Sharks are being processed and dried in the processing plants in the form of cottage industries along the shark landing centers. Shark products are not popular as a food item in the country; some minor and tribal communities are the only consumer of them. Different dried shark products such as shark skin, meat, fin, teeth and bone are smuggled to Myanmar through the border areas. In abroad, these products are sold at high prices. Dried shark fin has high demand worldwide for preparing soup and only some dried shark fins are exported to foreign countries like China, Hong Kong, Singapore and Thailand through proper channel. Due to these man-made activities, Saw shark (*Pristis pristis*) has become a very rare species in the Bay of Bengal and some other shark species such as Tiger shark (*Galeocerdo cuvier*), Silky shark (*Carcharhinus falciformis*) are in vulnerable condition as well. Illegal and unreported export of shark products trade has been expanding rapidly, which causes serious threat to shark biodiversity in Bangladesh. As existing Fish

Volume 7 Issue 3 - 2018

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Received: April 27, 2018 | **Published:** May 25, 2018

Act of Bangladesh has no provisions of restriction about shark fishing or trading, the condition is getting worsened and over exploitation continues. In Sundarban, forestry laws limit shark fishing although it's not enough because of its territorial limitation of jurisdiction. Being a top predator, sharks help to maintain the balance of ocean ecosystem by keeping the food web in check. Shark biodiversity has been under serious threat for the creeds of some people. In Bangladesh, sharks have yet to be recognized as conservation priority although largely unregulated fishing goes on. The authority should give highest concern on conservation of shark biodiversity and sustainable management activities should be initiated as early as possible to protect sharks species from the verge of extinction. Shark sanctuary should be established where shark fishing could be banned for a certain period of time. The conviction of law violators should also be ensured. Marine Protected Area (MPA) should be increased in the Bay so that they can move freely. A complete check list of shark species should also be made and according to their IUCN conservation status Shark Action Plan should be formulated and implemented. Shark trade and export should be monitored on a regular basis and record should be kept properly. Awareness should also be created among mass people about the harmful impacts of illegal shark catching and trading as most of the people don't seem to have any knowledge about the existence of shark and shark fishing in the Bay of Bengal region of Bangladesh.

Acknowledgements

None.

Conflict of interest

The author declares there is no conflict of interest.