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ENVIRONMENT

Recreational Fishers are Increasingly Targeting Sharks and Rays. Researchers are Concerned

By Rachel Delia Benaim · 2 hours ago · weather.com



Hammerhead sharks float in the open sea. (Getty Images)

At a Glance

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- Recreational catches of sharks and rays have increased around the world over the last sixty years.
- Climate change, pollution and the fishing industry are among some threats already endangering sharks and rays.
- The increase in shark and ray catches started in the 1990s and has been particularly sharp in Oceania and South America

Recreational fishers are increasingly targeting sharks and rays, and researchers are concerned.

Recreational catches of sharks and rays have increased around the world over the last 60 years, a new study published in Frontiers in Marine Science by a team international scientists reveals. Sharks and rays now accounts for 5-6% of total global leisure catches.

Researchers discovered that catches of cartilaginous fish like sharks and rays now comprises some 54,000 metric tons, or about 6%, of the annual catch for recreational purposes.

There are currently an estimated 500 species of sharks around the world. Sharks play an important role in the aquatic ecosystem, keeping the oceans in balance. Sharks are critical to marine ecosystems and without them, the food chain collapses, Forbes reported last year. "As apex predators, they control the density and behavior of their prey and indirectly affect the abundance of species further down the food web."

Climate change, pollution, the rise of popularity in shark fin soup and the fishing industry are among some threats already endangering sharks and rays. Moreover, as the mortality rate of sharks and rays has climbed, they have less of a chance of maturing and procreating, causing the species to further dwindle.

Study co-author Daniel Pauly mentioned another factor: "the problem with sharks and rays is that even if they are thrown back into the ocean, a practice that is not uncommon as many recreational fishers now practice 'catch-and-release,' not all individuals survive." The principal investigator of the Sea Around Us initiative at the University of British Columbia's Institute for the Ocean and Fisheries added "for example, 98% of scalloped hammerheads die" after catch-and-release.

The data collection for the statistics necessary to ascertain the increased rate of shark and ray fishing proved challenging. The research team was able to learn about what is and has been caught in 125 countries over the past 60+ years.

Another issue facing sharks and rays is certain types of sport fishing. Study co-author Jessica Meeuwig, director of the Marine Futures Lab at the University of Western Australia, noted that sports such as beach-based shark fishing can harm sharks.

"In Australia, a group of recreational fishers lands large tiger sharks and hammerheads from the beach," Meeuwig said in a statement. "These large animals are essential to population health and are unlikely to survive the experience of a lengthy fight and subsequently being dragged up the beach. Given the threatened status of these species globally, such practices are inappropriate."

The increase in shark and ray catches started in the 1990s and "has been particularly sharp in Oceania and South America," said Kátia Freire, the study's lead author and a professor at the Universidade Federal de Sergipe in Brazil. "However, we may actually be underestimating the real amounts, as accessing recreational fisheries data is particularly difficult. Most countries do not compile these data or those that do, do not incorporate them into their national fisheries statistics that are reported to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations."

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