

Shark finning hitting Gulf sharks hard

October 19 2012, by Michael Casey



In this Wednesday July 18, 2012 file photo, a man points at a shark while he slides through an underwater tunnel at a hotel in Dubai , United Arab Emirates. (AP Photo/Kamran Jebreili, File)

Armed with a clip board and wearing bright yellow waders, Rima Jabado looked the part of a government inspector at the Dubai fish market as workers sawed the fins off hundreds of dead sharks from Oman and bagged them for export to Asian restaurants.

But the 33-year-old Lebanese-Canadian doctoral student was not

chatting with fisherman on the market's slippery floors and jotting down notes to monitor the lucrative and largely unregulated trade that has decimated stocks of certain [sharks](#), but rather to document what species are being caught in the waters across the [Persian Gulf](#).

"The government will not react unless we give them actual data," said Jabado, as she raced to take [genetic samples](#) from the sharks before their [carcasses](#) were carted off and fins auctioned to the highest bidder.

"The problem is that I'm the only one doing research. There is not enough being done in the UAE and the region," she said. "We know [shark populations](#) are depleting around the world so we are kind of racing against time to see what is going on."

Fishermen across the globe kill as many as 70 million sharks each year for their fins, which can sell for \$700 a pound (450 grams), while the soup prized for Chinese banquets and weddings can cost \$100 a bowl. The fin trade has devastated several species including hammerheads, oceanic whitetip, blue, threshers and silky and contributed to 181 shark and ray species being listed by the International Union for [Conservation of Nature](#) as threatened with extinction.



In this Tuesday, July 3, 2012 file photo, Rima Jabado, right, a marine scientist and shark researcher measures a baby spottail shark before she tagged and released it back to the sea, off the Dubai coast , United Arab Emirates. (AP Photo/Kamran Jebreili, File)

The trade is legal, though efforts are being made to ban the practice of "finning"—hacking the fins off of sharks and throwing the rest overboard, often while they are still alive. Four years ago, under international pressure, the UAE joined the growing number of countries banning the practice.

Spain is top among 82 countries that export fins, mostly to Hong Kong and other Asian markets, followed by Singapore and Taiwan, according to Sonja Fordham, president of the Washington, D.C.-based Shark Advocates International. The United Arab Emirates is ranked fourth mostly because it is a regional hub for the trade in sharks coming predominantly from Oman but also from Yemen, Iran and Africa.

The trade thrives in the Gulf, as it does worldwide, shark conservationists said, mainly because there aren't enough people out there like Jabado. The fast-talking Jabado, who favors a white bandanna, black T-shirt and trousers when she is in the field, is the only person in the UAE assessing shark numbers.

Governments in the region have until now largely ignored sharks in favor of more commercial fish species like grouper.

They have almost no data on the numbers and species of sharks that can be found from the Red Sea to the Gulf of Oman, often lack the laws that would curb the trade and don't have the money or the political will to enforce the laws they do have on the books, such as bans on shark fishing.



In this Tuesday, July 3, 2012 photo, Rima Jabado, a marine scientist and shark researcher pulls up a baby spottail shark from the water for the tagging off the Dubai coast, United Arab Emirates. (AP Photo/Kamran Jebreili, File)

"In an ideal world what we would have is every population of every shark monitored so we know how many adults there are," said Nick Dulvy, a Canadian researcher who is the co-chair of IUCN's Shark Specialist Group that is tasked with determining which species are endangered.

The challenges were laid bare at a shark conservation workshop in the UAE this month. Governments from across the Gulf sent representatives and all offered testimony of just why their country wasn't doing more to protect sharks.

Kuwait talked of protecting two shark species but admitted enforcement of its ban on shark fishing was weak and that government inspectors and fishermen couldn't even identify them. Saudi Arabia claimed it banned the export of fins in 2008 but had no answers as to why its fins continue to turn up in Hong Kong markets. Oman sent a government team with no experience with sharks while Bahrain and the UAE admitted they lacked sufficient data to determine whether sharks were overfished in their waters.

"Our hands are tied because of insufficient data," Mohammed Tabish, a fisheries specialist with the UAE Ministry of Environment and Water, told the conference. "It's all collected in general form and includes no species specific data which makes it difficult to take the necessary actions for particular species."



In this Tuesday, June 12, 2012 file photo, a worker cuts a shark fin at a fish market in Dubai , United Arab Emirates. (AP Photo/Kamran Jebreili, File)

Yemen and Somalia, whose sharks routinely turn up in Dubai's market, are typical of countries with bigger problems. Both have thriving shark fisheries—Yemen ranks sixth in exporters to Hong Kong and is one of the few countries that consume sharks domestically.

Yemen has no laws protecting sharks while Somalia lacks the means to enforce the laws it has on the books due to a lack of funds, its long-running civil war and fledging government.

"If you go to the Somalia coast at night, you will see thousands of ships fishing illegally, mostly for sharks and lobster," Ahmed Shaikh Mahmoud Osman, wildlife director for Somalia's Ministry of Fisheries and Environment, said of the boats which come primarily from Asian

countries. "We need fishing boats to safeguard the coast. We also need renewal of formal laws to stop criminals and greedy business people who come to our coast and smuggle our resources."

Dulvey, Fordham and Jabado encouraged the region's governments to start collecting data and using it to draw up management plans which can include quotas and outright bans on endangered shark species.



In this Tuesday, June 12, 2012 file photo, a man carries a blacktip shark imported from Oman to be auctioned at a fish market in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. (AP Photo/Kamran Jebreili, File)

Until now, no governments in the Gulf have quotas on shark fishing nor have any national shark conservation plans. The UAE, Bahrain and Qatar do, however, give protection to sawfish—a shark-like ray species that is the most threatened marine species in the world.

Fordham also said Oman and Yemen could join the UAE in requiring that sharks are landed with their fins attached—rather than processed at sea—which helps with enforcement and makes it easier to collect scientific data.

"Overall a lot more needs to be done to insure sustainability of shark population, especially species that are exceptionally vulnerable," Fordham said.

Oman and Yemen have promised to develop shark conservation plans while Oman and Abu Dhabi have started doing stock assessments of several shark species—the first step in developing a management plan.



In this Tuesday, June 12, 2012 file photo, workers cut shark fins at a fish market in Dubai , United Arab Emirates. (AP Photo/Kamran Jebreili, File)

For the most part, though, the job of data collection is left to Jabado, who for the past two years has visited fish markets across the UAE 180 times, identifying shark species, sex ratio and abundance among other things. From that, she has concluded there are 30 shark [species](#) in the waters off the coast of the UAE and 37 coming in from Oman —about two-thirds which are listed by the IUCN as near threatened or endangered including several hammerheads.

She also has interviewed more than 100 fishermen and spent more than 100 hours on boats tagging sharks in the Persian Gulf. She has only caught five sharks herself in that time, confirming what 82 percent of the Emirati fishermen she interviewed have said: Shark numbers are down and those caught are much smaller.

"They say that 15 years ago, you looked at sunset in Dubai and could see fins," Jabado said. "They used to catch monstrous sharks, sharks bigger than a bus. They don't see those sizes anymore."

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