

A look at Florida's charterboat-based recreational shark fishery

September 24 2014

The challenge and excitement of catching a large fish makes shark fishing very appealing for recreational anglers. However, many species of sharks have experienced population declines due to commercial overfishing. Although generally overlooked by conservation advocates, catch and release shark fishing can provide a strong economic incentive to protect sharks, benefiting both ecotourism businesses and shark conservation.

Florida is one of the largest recreational shark fishing markets in the world. However, Florida's recreational shark fishing industry remains poorly understood. A new study by researchers at the University of Miami examines the scale of Florida's charterboat shark fishing industry as well as the knowledge, attitudes, and practices of charterboat captains whose clients fish for sharks in Florida.

"Florida is one of the most popular places for [recreational fishing](#) in the U.S. and most anglers in this state have a strong conservation ethic," says David Shiffman, doctoral candidate at the UM Abess Center for Ecosystem Science and Policy and corresponding author of the study. "Although it is not legally required, many utilize catch and release methods, because they value the ecological role sharks play and are concerned about population decline in certain species."

In the current study, the researchers used a combination of website content analysis, surveys, and other online databases to examine the charterboat fishing industry.

"There is a growing body of literature that suggests that most of the people that go on fishing trips are tourists that plan their vacations based on internet searches," says Shiffman. "The businesses' websites inform prospective clients about the scope and economic value of the shark fishing experience."

Although shark fishing is popular throughout Florida, it's heavily concentrated in the Florida Keys. The study found 137 charterboat companies that specifically advertise shark fishing trips online, throughout the state.

"This is likely to be a very conservative estimate," Shiffman says. "But we think it provides a pretty good snapshot of people's knowledge and attitudes."

Ten percent of these websites had a clearly stated catch and release policy. Only 1.4 percent of the websites listed a catch and kill policy. Of the charterboat captains that answered the survey, 82 percent indicated that they always practice catch and release when fishing for sharks. They also reported that their clients are often happy to release the sharks they catch.

"Our study revealed that in 2012 alone, anglers took 842,756 charterboat fishing trips throughout Florida, including shark fishing trips. That same year recreational anglers caught 550,000 sharks, with an overall release rate of 68 percent," says Dr. Neil Hammerschlag research assistant professor at UM's Rosenstiel School of Marine and Atmospheric Science and co-author of the study.

The researchers found that one of the main species targeted by recreational fishers are hammerhead sharks. Both local species of hammerheads are considered Endangered by the IUCN Red List. Moreover, hammerhead sharks are not good candidates for catch and

release methods.

"Our research has shown that hammerhead sharks fight vigorously on a fishing line and experience high stress levels," says Hammerschlag. "Just because they swim away, doesn't mean that they will survive the event."

The study suggests that because Florida's charterboat fishers have a strong shark conservation ethic, specific guidelines requiring the immediate release of hammerhead [sharks](#), without first fighting on the line, are necessary to reduce the risk of mortality for these endangered animals.

The study is titled "An Assessment of the scale, practices and conservation implications of Florida's charterboat-based recreational shark fishery" The findings are published in the journal *Fisheries*.

The researchers hope this work helps recreational anglers make informed conservation decisions and that it will lead to new partnerships that promote best practices and support responsible and sustainable methods.

Provided by University of Miami

Citation: A look at Florida's charterboat-based recreational shark fishery (2014, September 24) retrieved 10 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2014-09-florida-charterboat-based-recreational-shark-fishery.html>

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