

Cuba launches shark protection plan produced with US group

October 21 2015, by Michael Weissenstein

Cuba announced Wednesday that it is launching a long-term plan to preserve its sharks in cooperation with a U.S. environmental group, part of a rapidly accelerating partnership between the two countries aimed at preserving their shared waters in the Gulf of Mexico and Florida Straits.

Nearly a year after Presidents Barack Obama and Raul Castro announced that they would end a half-century of official hostility and start moving toward normalization, the most visible progress has been in the realm of [environmental protection](#).

The shark plan announced by Cuba after two years of work with the U.S.-based Environmental Defense Fund commits Cuba to recording shark catches by fishing vessels and eventually implementing stricter rules that would limit shark fishing and protect shark nurseries.

Secretary of State John Kerry announced in Valparaiso, Chile this month that the U.S. and Cuba were signing an accord to work together on protecting marine preservation areas in far western Cuba located a relatively short distance from Texas and Florida across the Gulf of Mexico and Florida Straits.

In April, a research vessel operated by the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration carried marine scientists from Cuba and other countries on a research cruise aimed at gathering information about the spawning of blue-fin tuna, a commercially valuable and highly threatened species.

"That voyage opens the possibility of deeper relations in the future," said Julio Baisre, a marine scientist and vice-director for science of the Cuban National Aquarium. "We're hopeful, we're open to it. I think there are many ways in which we can work together."

Cuba has perhaps the best-preserved environment in the region, particularly in coastal waters boasting populations of fish, [sharks](#) and coral in greater abundance than in other parts of the Caribbean where overfishing has largely decimated marine life. Cuba's relatively thriving marine environment is due to both strong environmental protection and a lack of economic development because of the country's struggling, centrally planned economy.

Sharks, the highest predator in many marine food chains, have been decimated by overfishing across the world. Protection of sharks and marine life is taking on increasing economic importance for Cuba as warming with the U.S. attracts a flood of tourists, many drawn to the island's spectacular diving and snorkeling sites.

Because many larger marine species migrate between Cuban waters and those of Mexico and the United States, American environmental groups are eager to help the island preserve its gains by bringing U.S. expertise and technology that can be used by Cuban scientists.

The shark plan commits Cuba to providing fisherman with training in identifying sharks and recording shark catches, then places limits on the size and number of sharks that Cuban fisherman can catch, and where they can catch them.

The Environmental Defense Fund is signing a memorandum of understanding with Cuba this week that envisions bringing American scientists to Cuba for at least three years to help researchers here to help put the new shark protection plan into effect.

"The environment is the lowest-hanging fruit," said Daniel Whittle, the Environmental Defense Fund's senior director for Cuba. "It's in our national interest when Cuba protects its resources."

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