

Liberia wrestles with poverty and ecology in bid to protect sharks

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Fishing of sharks and rays is common in Liberia and they can be seen in port markets around Africa, such as in Somalia's capital here

George Toe reflects on the good old days, when catching a couple of sharks helped fill a fisherman's pocket and fed a hungry family.

Fifteen years or so ago, local fishermen who ventured off the coast of Liberia could expect to come back with 200, maybe 300, of the fish in their boats, the 45-year-old recalls.

"Now it is difficult to get even 10," he said. "Now you have to go 45 miles (72 kilometres) in the water before you meet up with any."

Toe's worry encapsulates the dilemma facing Liberia, one of the world's poorest countries, as it seeks to protect these beautiful, endangered but often under-estimated species.

Each year, tens of millions of sharks and rays are hauled from the sea, typically to meet a voracious demand in East and Southeast Asia for shark fin soup or products used in traditional medicine.

Experts say the plunder is having a devastating effect on the health of the sea—but protecting the species often meets resistance from fishermen, who see the catch as a vital source of income.

Fishing provides a livelihood to more than 30,000 people in Liberia and accounts for two-thirds of all animal proteins consumed nationally.

On the UN's Human Development Index, the country ranks a lowly 181 out of 189 nations. The average salary is \$100 per month, and many Liberians survive on just \$1 a day.

What's at stake in shark and ray conservation is not just the survival of these ancient species but supporting commercial fish stocks.

"Loss of sharks can lead to dramatic imbalances in the ecosystem," says campaign group Environmental Justice Foundation (EJF).

Catching sharks ricochets down the food chain as big fish decimate

small fish in the absence of the apex predator.

Monitoring programme

Under a three-year initiative, the National Fisheries and Aquaculture Authority will collect data on shark and ray populations, monitoring their numbers and location, and track fishing, both legal and illegal.

The action follows a pledge on training and data collection that Liberia made with 12 other West African countries in 2014 to help shark and ray conservation.

A trial programme has recorded 19 species in Liberian waters, from great hammerhead sharks to devil rays.

All feature on the Red List of threatened species compiled by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

Sharks and rays are particularly vulnerable as they grow slowly, hit sexual maturity late and have a low reproductive rate, according to the EJF.

"Accurate population monitoring and sustainable management of these species are essential for long-term solutions, both for the Liberian fishing community and for the ecosystem they depend on," said Emma Glassco, head of the fisheries agency.

Doubts

But data collection is just one step—it is what happens at sea which counts, and the support of local fishermen is vital.

Many of those who spoke to AFP clearly had reservations.

"We used to catch enough fish... Now, it is difficult to catch fish where we used to," fisherman Kojo Amuaysee, 42, said, pulling two sharks out of his motorised canoe after returning to port.

But he said the fishing sector had "too many people".

"I don't want to believe that it is the killing of the sharks and rays that is sending fish away."

Toe blamed declining catches on practices by illegal trawlers from neighbouring Ivory Coast and Guinea.

"They come fishing in our waters and later dump the unwanted fish, which pollutes the sea and chases away the living fish—they go farther out."

The EJF is backing the conservation project with a grassroots programme, helped by video presentations, to explain to fishermen why sharks and rays are so important.

The outreach suggests that fishermen can become keenly sensitive to conservation—some have even suggested that a law be passed to punish shark overfishing, said EJF's Augustine Fayiah.

"During the three years we will get to know if the fishermen will restrict themselves. If not, the government may decide to pass a law on stopping the killing of the two species," he said.

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