

# How you can help protect sharks, and what doesn't work

September 13 2022, by David Shiffman

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Sharks are some of the most ecologically important and most threatened

animals on Earth. Recent reports show that [up to one-third of all known species of sharks and their relatives, rays](#), are threatened with extinction. Unsustainable overfishing is the biggest threat by far.

Losing sharks can disrupt coastal food webs that billions of people depend on for food. When [food chains](#) lose their top predators, the rest can unravel as [smaller prey species multiply](#).

In my years of talking with the public about sharks and [ocean conservation](#), I've found that many people care about sharks and want to help but don't know how. The solutions can be quite technical, and it's challenging to understand and appreciate the scale and scope of some of the threats.

At the same time, there is an enormous amount of oversimplification and even misinformation about these important topics, which can lead well-intentioned people to support policies that experts know won't work.

I am a [marine conservation biologist](#) and have sought to improve this situation by [surveying shark researchers](#) and helping scientists identify [research topics that can advance conservation](#). I've also written a book, "[Why Sharks Matter: A Deep Dive With the World's Most Misunderstood Predator](#)." Here are three ways that anyone can make a difference for sharks and avoid taking steps that are ineffective or even harmful.

## **Don't eat unsustainable seafood**

The No. 1 threat to sharks and rays—and arguably, to marine biodiversity in general—is unsustainable overfishing. Some fishing methods [are incredibly destructive](#) to marine life and habitats.

They can also produce high rates of [bycatch](#)—the unintended catch of nontarget species. For example, fishermen pursuing tuna may accidentally catch [sea turtles](#) or sharks swimming near the tuna.

The single most effective thing that individual consumers can do is to avoid seafood produced using these harmful methods. This does not mean completely avoiding seafood, as [some advocates urge](#). Seafood is healthy, delicious and culturally important, and there are environmentally friendly ways of catching it sustainably. There are even [sustainable fisheries for sharks](#).

Reputable organizations such as California's [Monterey Bay Aquarium](#) publish [sustainable seafood guides](#) that rate different types of seafood based on how they are caught or raised. While experts may quibble over details of some of these rankings, consumers can follow these guidelines and know that they are helping to protect sharks and ocean life in general.

### **Support reputable environmental nonprofits, not harmful extremists**

Lots of great environmental nonprofit organizations work on shark issues and offer opportunities to get involved, such as donating money and communicating with elected officials and other decision-makers. In my book, I describe the work of many of these groups, including my favorite, [Shark Advocates International](#).

Unfortunately, some organizations promote pseudoscience that doesn't help anyone or anything. In a 2021 study, colleagues and I surveyed employees of 78 nonprofits that work on shark conservation issues to understand whether and how these organizations engaged with the science of shark conservation.

We found that a small but vocal minority had never read scientific reports or spoken with scientists, and held [blatantly incorrect and harmful views that cannot help sharks](#). For example, some organizations are trying to get certain airlines to stop carrying shark products like dried fins, without acknowledging that well over 95% of fins are shipped by sea or that sustainable sources of these fins exist.

One of my particular pet peeves is amateur online petitions that may not reflect actual conditions. For example, in the spring of 2022, some 60,000 people signed a petition calling for Florida to ban the practice of shark finning—without recognizing that Florida had [banned shark finning in the early 1990s](#). As I explain in my book, it is essential to identify organizations that use science in support of worthwhile conservation goals and avoid promoting others that do not.

## Look to experts

Many ocean science, management and conservation experts are [active on social media](#). Following them is a great way to learn about fascinating new scientific discoveries and [conservation](#) issues.

Unfortunately, [sharks](#) also get a lot of sensational coverage in the media, and well-intentioned but uninformed people often spread misinformation on social media. For example, you may have seen posts celebrating Hawaii for [banning shark fishing in its waters](#)—but these posts don't note that about 99% of fishing in Hawaii occurs in federal waters.

Don't take the bait. By getting your information from reliable sources, you can help other people learn more about these fascinating, ecologically important animals, why they need humans' help and the most effective steps to take.

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