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# Making the Seas Safe for Sharks



By [Gemma Alexander](#)

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Last year, Earth911 encouraged readers to take action by signing a petition to [protect endangered shark species](#). And it appears that world leaders listened. At the CITES Convention in Panama last November, delegates elected to greatly expand the number of shark and ray species protected under CITES. The international treaty now covers more than 100 endangered and threatened species of sharks and rays. It was a major win for a widely misunderstood group of fish. But there is still a long way to go.

## Sharks

There are more than 450 species of sharks, a group of cartilaginous fishes that evolved more than 400 million years ago. Most sharks are apex predators in their marine ecosystems. Apex predators tend to act as keystone species in an ecosystem, [protecting biodiversity](#) by regulating prey populations. Sharks and

their close relatives, rays, are usually migratory, take many years to mature, and have only a few young at a time. All of these characteristics make them [vulnerable to decline](#).

In the last 50 years, [shark populations](#) have dropped by up to 70%, with nearly a fifth of reef populations becoming functionally extinct. By some estimates, more than a third of shark species are now threatened with extinction. [Warming waters](#), ocean pollution, and overfishing can directly reduce shark populations as well as deplete their food sources. Reliable numbers are hard to find, but each year it's estimated that [100 million sharks](#) are killed for their fins and as bycatch from other fishing industries.

## CITES

The first shark species received protection under CITES, the [Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora](#), in 2003. At CoP19 last fall, 97 species of sharks and rays – including [19 requiem shark](#) species, which are among the most endangered and least regulated, were proposed for regulation. All of them were added to CITES Appendix II – a list of threatened species that require protection through trade controls to maintain a sustainable population.

CITES is a voluntary but binding international agreement that requires participants to adopt domestic legislation complying with the established protection framework. That framework subjects international trade in selected species to a licensing system. Each party to the Convention must establish a management authority in charge of the licensing system and establish a scientific authority to advise them on how trade affects the status of protected species.

Finning was already illegal in the United States. But after years in limbo, within weeks of Cop19, the U.S. Senate passed the [Shark Fin Sales Elimination Act](#) as part of H.R. 7776 that made the trade or sale of shark fins illegal as well. Only 21 shark species are [currently listed](#) as endangered or threatened under the Endangered Species Act, which is the primary U.S. legislation that enacts CITES.



The greatest threats to most shark species are overfishing and bycatch.



## Fishing and Bycatch

Direct harvesting, through overfishing and bycatch, is the [greatest threat](#) to most shark species. While Americans no longer have to worry about local restaurants serving shark fin soup, sharks are still threatened as bycatch in other fishing industries. In the Pacific, American vessels engaged in open ocean [longline fishing](#) transitioned to monofilament leader material to reduce bycatch by 40%. A new device called [SharkGuard](#) is being tested that may reduce bycatch by up to 90%. But even as the most responsible fisheries still have a way to go before achieving sustainability, regular [reports](#) by NOAA indicate that many countries continue to permit illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing. To ensure that you only eat the most [sustainable seafood](#), check the [Seafood Watch App](#) or print a [sustainable seafood guide](#).

When traveling in areas where shark fishing is [still legal](#), resist the urge to try eating shark. Even in countries where shark fins and meat are still legal, [eating them](#) contributes to their extinction. In the U.S. and abroad, products [made from shark](#) are not as strictly regulated as shark meat and fins. Beware of [souvenirs](#) made from the teeth or skins of sharks and rays. Look for more [sustainable fish leathers](#) instead. Just as whale-watching can be a tool for conservation, shark-watching tours – from a boat or diving – are becoming more popular. However, like whale-watching, it's important to [research guidelines](#) for ethical and safe (for you and the sharks) practices and providers before spending money.

## Protecting Sharks

Preserving the biodiversity of ocean life helps maintain the balance of a healthy ocean ecosystem. And each shark species plays a role in maintaining that balance. Yet the same environmental damage that harms other marine species also threatens sharks. You can help [protect the oceans](#) by reducing your own [carbon footprint](#), working towards a [plastic-free](#) lifestyle, and [contacting your elected representatives](#) in support of [legislation](#) and [treaties](#) that protect endangered marine species and ecosystems.

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By [Gemma Alexander](#)

Gemma Alexander has an M.S. in urban horticulture and a backyard filled with native plants. After working in a genetics laboratory and at a landfill, she now writes about the environment, the arts and family. See more of her writing [here](#).

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