

Project Update: August 2017

Background:

Apex predators of the oceans, sharks have been surviving for over 400 million years. However today, they are one of the most threatened fish worldwide owing to the high demand for their fins, meat and oil. India is amongst the top three shark harvesters of the world with a targeted shark fishery still operating in the Andaman Islands. The islands are recognised as a global biodiversity hotspot and 'hope spot', yet information on the diversity, stock structure, ecology and life history of sharks is lacking. In order to fill these gaps, I am assessing the biology and fisheries aspects of sharks in the Andaman Islands. This is carried out by conducting demographic surveys of sharks at fish-landing sites and interview based surveys with stakeholders across the Islands to find out the species-specific trends, threats and conservation needs of sharks in the Andaman Islands.

Summary of activities conducted and activities planned for the next phase:

Phase I

The fieldwork for the project commenced in January 2017 with the first phase of the project involving collation and review of information from past reports and publications. Simultaneously, landing sites in south Andaman Islands were visited to assess which of them landed shark catches. In this phase we also developed a rapport with the fishermen, middlemen and traders at the landing sites of South Andamans, along with owners of the cold-storage units that exported sharks from the islands to mainland India.

Phase II

Phase two involved systematic surveys at landing sites. We surveyed every vessel that was landing their catch and for each vessel we recorded shark species landed and collected morphometries of all or at least 15 sharks from every landing. We conducted 82 fish-landing surveys from January 2017 till August 2017, and have sampled a total of 1049 shark individuals across 32 species.

Informal discussions were carried out with fishermen, middlemen and owners of boats at landing sites to document the habitats from where sharks were fished, seasonal fishing grounds, season gear use, and gears used specifically for targeted shark fishery, and information on national and international markets for the various shark species landed. Informal discussions at cold storage units were also carried out to record the trade and demand of shark and shark products. As part of setting up a community network for reporting and discussing shark diversity and changes in catches over time and space, five dive centers and two sport-fishers were approached and provided information to us for shark sightings in order to initiate contribution to a database.

Phase III (August 2017 to December 2017)

In the next phase we will continue our landing site surveys and informal discussions. Follow-ups with the sport fishers and dive centres will be conducted. Interview surveys will also continue across the islands to assess the perceptions towards shark densities and changes and current status of shark fisheries. During the last part of Phase 3, an interactive session will be carried out with fishing communities and all individuals who were

interviewed to discuss the conservation and sustainability implications of unmanaged fisheries.

Phase IV (January 2018)

In the final phase, post data collection, we will analyse our data and submit a final report to the Rufford Small Grants Foundation along with publishing our findings in a peer-reviewed journal.



Top left: Buyers and sellers engage in an auction as the sharks get weighed. Top right: Fisher folk wait for fish catch caught from the trawlers. © Zoya Tyabji. Below: Measuring morphometrics of a shark. © Dipani Sutaria.