

Research and Conservation of Elasmobranchs in Watamu Marine National Park and Reserve, Kenya

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Elasmobranchs are globally threatened through overexploitation, by-catch and habitat degradation. Incidental sightings of sharks and rays have been reported in Watamu marine National Park and Reserve in Kenya including nine species that are IUCN Redlisted. However, as is common in most parts of the Western Indian Ocean, there is limited information documenting their diversity and abundance. Fin-trading is growing in Kenya and poaching of black-tip reef sharks have been observed in the shallow areas of the Park. A research and education project was initiated to document the species diversity and abundance of elasmobranchs and raise awareness through education. Timed swims, baited traps with videos cameras (BRUVs) and incidental sightings were used to assess species diversity and abundance within the Park and Reserve. Class sessions and educational field excursion were carried out with school teachers, students and community groups to raise awareness of elasmobranchs. Nine species of sharks and rays were recorded. Bluespotted stingrays (*Neotrygon kuhlii*) were the most abundant and distributed in all habitats surveyed recording a maximum of 14 individuals per 45minutes timed swim and an average of 3 per swim in ten replicates Black-tip reef sharks (*Carcharhinus melanopterus*) were recorded in 3 shallow sites near rock pool habitats where they frequented. Spotted Eagle ray (*Aetobatus narinari*) was sighted in fishers catch from the reserve. Four educational sessions in each of the nine schools around the park and reserve were carried out. Eighteen teachers were trained to carrying out shark and ray education and a manual on elasmobranchs developed to facilitate further course delivery to schools. Conservation actions focusing on the elasmobranchs habitats and their exploitation should be implemented in the park to protect these species.