Proposed special session of the 11th WIOMSA Scientific Symposium, Mauritius, 2019

Conservation and management of sharks and rays in the Western Indian Ocean: National Plans of Action and international conventions

Background

The Western Indian Ocean (WIO) has been identified as a global hotspot for chondrichthyan (shark and ray) species diversity, with at least 227 species identified to date. Many of these species are found only in the WIO, therefore ensuring their conservation and sustainable utilization within the region is essential.

The WIO is also characterised by extensive fisheries, from the artisanal level to large-scale industrial fleets, operating from the coast to the high seas, including illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing. There is a high demand for, and legal and illegal trade in, chondrichthyan products, particularly shark meat for local consumption and shark and ray fins and mobulid gill plates, for the global shark fin and gill plate trade.

Shark and ray species are generally slow growing, with late maturity and low reproductive capacity, making them highly susceptible to overfishing. Consequently, 59 shark and ray species (26%) in the WIO are listed as threatened on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species and thus face a high risk of extinction in the wild. As thousands of people living in coastal communities within the WIO countries are dependent on fishes, sharks and rays for their income and livelihoods, as well as cultural and traditional uses, sustainable utilization of these resources is paramount and as much a social issue as it is an ecological issue. There is thus a critical need for corrective management and improved conservation of the WIO shark and ray species, particularly those that are threatened or likely to become threatened.

Addressing these issues through policy development

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations developed an international plan of action (IPOA-SHARKS) for the conservation and management of sharks and rays (FAO 1999), which advocated that states should adopt a national plan of action for conservation and management of shark stocks (Shark-plan) if: i) their vessels conduct directed fisheries for sharks, ii) their vessels regularly catch sharks as bycatch, iii) their vessels catch sharks on the high seas, or iv) if vessels of other states catch sharks in their waters.

Considering the threats facing sharks and rays in the WIO, the Parties of the Nairobi Convention for the Protection, Management and Development of the Marine and Coastal Environment of the Western Indian Ocean agreed in 2012 to include sharks in their program of work and called for regional collaboration on the conservation and management of sharks. All ten states within the WIO (Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, South Africa, Seychelles, Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius, French Indian Ocean Territories) are party to the Nairobi Convention and all have shark-directed fisheries or fisheries that take sharks as bycatch, suggesting that all ten states should develop national plans of action for shark and ray conservation and management (NPOAs, as advocated by the FAO IPOA-Sharks). However, most of these states have little or no legislation for shark fishing and, by 2019, formal NPOAs for sharks and rays have been developed only in Seychelles and South Africa, while Madagascar and Kenya are currently developing theirs, and management of sharks and rays in French Indian Ocean Territories is guided through the European Union Plan of Action (EUPOA Sharks).

Session objectives
In 2017, a collaborative process led by the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) was initiated to develop a regional roadmap for shark and ray conservation and management in the WIO. WCS now intends to host a special session at the upcoming 11th WIOMSA symposium, titled *National Plans of Action for the conservation and management of sharks and rays in the Western Indian Ocean: development, status of implementation and knowledge sharing*. The session is intended to provide a platform to bring together relevant stakeholders involved in the development of shark NPOAs in the WIO countries, to share lessons learned on the development process and implementation of NPOAs, with stakeholders from countries that have not yet initiated the NPOA development process.

**Expected outputs**

1. The session is aimed at knowledge sharing on aspects of shark NPOA development, including the development process, writing and preparation of the NPOA document, and the implementation of the action plan. Through presentations and group discussion, stakeholders having experience with the NPOA process in their countries will be invited to share the successes, challenges, failures and lessons learned during the process, to guide those stakeholders from countries that have not yet developed a shark NPOA.

2. The meeting will also provide an opportunity for sharing of documentation, such as finalised NPOAs, which can be used as examples, templates or frameworks for countries that have not yet developed these.

3. Increased capacity for the development of NPOAs in countries that have not yet developed a shark NPOA.

**Targeted audience**

1. Representatives from WIO countries that have developed an NPOA for sharks and rays, specifically those individuals who led or were involved in the writing of the NPOA document, or who facilitated the NPOA development process in their country.

2. Representatives from WIO countries that have not yet developed an NPOA for sharks and rays, specifically those individuals who may lead or be involved in the writing of the NPOA document, or who may facilitate the NPOA development process in their country.

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