

EXPLAINED

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India is one of the world's largest shark fishing nations and Maharashtra and Gujarat together contribute more than 50% of the harvest. But recently there has been a drop in the size of the sharks and their numbers. This has affected the fisheries sector and traders.

A new study by researchers from India, Australia and UAE has tried to identify the local drivers of this decline.

A study done in 2014 by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) had pointed out that a quarter of all the sharks, rays and other cartilaginous fish have a high risk of extinction. Another recent study published last year by researchers from over 15 countries added that about 50% of chondrichthyan species (sharks, rays and other cartilaginous fish) in the Arabian Sea were found to be in the threatened category of the IUCN.

Overfishing is one of the main reasons. The study published in May in *Ambio* adds that in India there is a high domestic demand for shark meat. "This study helped break the common perception that the sharks are caught for fin and exported. We found that for most of the fisherfolk, sharks were a non-target catch and was just an additional income. Few fishermen told us that they have sold large sharks for even 30,000 to 50,000," says Divya Karnad, Assistant Professor at Ashoka University and the first author of the work.

Coastal sharks and rays visit the areas near the shore during the breeding season but current disruption by fishing and coastal development play a major role in the sharks' sudden decline. Various studies have pointed fingers at improved and modern fishing gear, use of trawlers and deep-sea fishing for the loss.

In 2013, The Ministry of Environment & Forests had brought out a policy called "Fins Naturally Attached" to prevent finning of sharks. But this did not bring about a major impact as there was still demand for whole sharks. Also, the Indian Wildlife Act of 1972 has proved inadequate in protecting this species. Due to various efforts by the Government, only the whale shark numbers have made a revival.

"More laws need to be framed. The Government should identify the nurseries and the congregation areas of sharks and protect these areas from harmful fishing techniques. Sharks do not lay hundreds of eggs like other fish, there are usually just seven to eight eggs, or some species directly give birth. Considering this small number of young sharks, we should be extra careful in protecting them," adds Karnad.

Karnad is also the co-founder of InSeason Fish, a website which aims to bring awareness to the consumer. "At www.inseasonfish.com, we list out the fish that can be consumed and what one should avoid during the season. Obviously, when the customer demand goes low, the catch will also drop," explains Karnad.

The paper adds that the Indian Wildlife Act needs an urgent revival so that all endangered and critically endangered species in our waters get the required attention.

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