

FACT SHEET

US Smalltooth Sawfish *Pristis pectinata*



Background

The sawfishes are highly modified rays that evolved from ancient sharks over many millions of years. They are found around the globe in warm, coastal waters and, in some cases, rivers and lakes. There are five species of sawfish. Individuals can grow to 20 feet and weigh more than 1,000 pounds.



Photo Credit: NOAA

The sawfishes' characteristic long, tooth-studded snouts - used to find and injure prey – are easily entangled in fishing nets. Incidental catch of sawfish in fisheries targeting other species is the main cause of severe population declines. Like other rays and closely related sharks, sawfish have relatively low reproductive rates, making them exceptionally vulnerable to overexploitation. Although increasingly protected, sawfish “saws” are still sold as curios around the world, and their fins are highly prized for use in shark fin soup. Degradation of nearshore areas, particularly mangrove habitat, also poses a threat to sawfish recovery.

Today, sawfish are the world's most imperiled marine fish. All species are classified by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) as Endangered or Critically Endangered. As a result, the IUCN Shark Specialist Group (SSG) has recently produced a global strategy to prevent their extinction and promote their recovery.

Biology

In the US, Smalltooth Sawfish inhabit shallow, inshore waters, and are particularly associated with red mangroves and muddy or sandy bottom habitats. They reach sexual maturity at age 7-12, give birth to 15-20 young every other year, and can live at least 30 years.

Status & Range

The US range of Smalltooth Sawfish once extended from the Gulf of Mexico to North Carolina, and seasonally as far north as New York. Today, they are found almost exclusively in South Florida, particularly in protected areas of the Florida Keys and Everglades National Park. Scientists have estimated that the US population declined to less than 5% of virgin levels and is in danger of extinction. The IUCN classifies Smalltooth Sawfish as Critically Endangered, but – thanks to a decade of concerted recovery efforts – the US population is thought to be at least stabilized and perhaps increasing.

US Protection

Smalltooth sawfish were listed under the US Endangered Species Act (ESA) in 2003, as a result of petition from the Center for Marine Conservation (now Ocean Conservancy). In addition to strict prohibitions on all kinds of harm, the ESA listing prompted the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) to designate critical habitat, and lead the development of a comprehensive sawfish recovery plan that was finalized in 2009. Funding and implementation of the research, education, and conservation actions contained in this plan are essential for the survival of sawfish.



Photo Credit: NOAA

International Protection

All sawfish species are now listed under Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), an effort that the US began in 1997 and helped complete in 2013. This listing essentially amounts to a ban on international, commercial trade in sawfish and their parts.

In June 2014, Kenya proposed the listing of all sawfish species under Appendix I of the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS), which would obligate member countries to provide strict national protections. A decision on this proposal will be made in November 2014 at the Conference of Parties to CMS.

Amazing Facts



- Sawfish are born with sheaths on their saws to protect the mother.
- There have been no reports of sawfish off New Jersey, Maryland, or Virginia since 1928.
- Sawfish were regularly reported in North Carolina around the turn of the last century, but since 1915, there have been only three capture records (in 1937, 1963 and 1999).
- In 1898, one man reportedly caught 300 sawfish from the Indian River Lagoon in one season.
- US scientists recently began tagging smalltooth sawfish off Andros Island and are working to determine if US and Bahamas sawfish populations are connected.

The Role of Shark Advocates International

SAI President, Sonja Fordham, has long been a leading advocate for sawfish protection. She co-wrote the 1999 petition that led to the smalltooth sawfish listing under the ESA, and has since served on the US government's multi-disciplinary team responsible for planning and monitoring sawfish recovery. She was a major proponent for the listing of sawfish under CITES, and – in concert with her IUCN SSG colleagues and other partners – is working to secure additional safeguards through the IUCN Global Sawfish Conservation Strategy and the Convention on Migratory Species.



Photo Credit: Tonya Wiley

How You Can Help

Increased public awareness and engagement is key to effective sawfish protection, particularly as funding for the US Sawfish Recovery Plan and related outreach efforts has declined. You can help by:



Photo Credit: Colin Simpfendorfer

- * Contacting Members of Congress to voice your support for:
 - Restoring full funding of the Smalltooth Sawfish Recovery Plan;
 - Increased commercial fishery monitoring; and
 - Efforts to export US sawfish expertise to other countries.
- * Reporting any sawfish you catch or see through the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission website (www.myfwc.com) or by email: Sawfish@MyFWC.com and/or phone: 941-255-7403.
- * Remembering & informing others that it is illegal to target or injure a sawfish in any way. Captured animals should be released as carefully and quickly as possible, never lifted from the water or dragged ashore.

Learn more: From NMFS: www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/species/fish/smalltoothsawfish.html

From the IUCN SSG: <http://www.dulvy.com/global-sawfish-conservation-strategy.html>