



“Kill” Shark Tournaments / Trophy Fishermen Arguments for and against killing sharks for sport

The Shark Safe Network does not oppose responsible and ethical sportfishing. We believe that an educated recreational fishing community can be one of our biggest and most powerful allies in conserving sharks and our ocean’s resources. Trophy killing and killing of threatened species for sport, however, is bad for everyone, including the fishermen.

1. We’re not killing that many sharks and we release more than we bring in.

Actually recreational fishermen kill a very large number of sharks. Recreational fishermen in the state of Florida alone killed well over 140,000 sharks in 2007. The number of sharks “harvested” in the US in 2007 (not including Texas and Alaska) was 559,000. Over 14 million were caught and released. (Source: NOAA Fisheries: Office of Science and Technology). Yes it’s true that many more sharks are released than killed. The sharks that are brought in, however, are the large reproductive females that are responsible for maintaining the populations.

Sharks reproduce very slowly. They take many years to reach maturity – up to 20 years for some species – have long gestation periods, and give birth to relatively few young.

Many of the sharks killed are pregnant. Most of the tournaments are scheduled during the late Spring and Summer months when pregnant sharks are most likely to be caught.

By hanging dead sharks up on display and awarding cash prizes and publicity to fishermen who kill large sharks, the message to the community is that it’s good to kill sharks. This will only encourage more people to kill them.

2. There are tons of sharks. The ocean is “infested” with them. They’re not endangered.

Fishermen see sharks because they attract them with chum and bait. In fact, most of the sharks targeted by recreational fishermen and tournaments are threatened with extinction. Government fisheries departments, however, have been slow to provide protections to shark species that are endangered.

Some of the most popular big game sharks, including Great Hammerheads and Scalloped Hammerheads (Endangered – Very High Risk of Extinction), Makos and Threshers (Vulnerable – High Risk of Extinction) are all threatened globally and regionally in the Northwest Atlantic (the NW Atlantic includes the entire US East coast). (Source: The Conservation Status of Pelagic Sharks and Rays: Report of the IUCN Shark Specialist Group Pelagic Shark Red List Workshop).

“Records from fisheries and research vessels dating from the 1970’s to 2005 have revealed a dramatic nosedive in great shark populations. Tiger sharks and scalloped hammerheads may have declined more than 97% since the mid-1980’s, while numbers of smooth hammerheads and bull sharks are believed to have fallen by 99% off the east coast of the U.S.” (Source: The Guardian – Death of a predator: big sharks are disappearing – and the world’s fisheries are suffering as a result – March 30, 2007).

Scalloped hammerhead, white and thresher sharks are each estimated to have declined by over 75% in the past 15 years. (Source: Baum et al. 2003: Collapse and conservation of shark populations in the Northwest Atlantic).

Catch rate analyses in the Northwest Atlantic suggest significant declines in abundance of blue sharks (Simpendorfer et al 2002, Baum et al. 2003). Increasing fin prices, further depletion of less productive sharks and lack of management will lead to greater pressure on blue shark stocks. (Clarke et al. 2007).

And again recreational fishermen looking for trophy fish or records and tournaments all target the large females that keep the species going.

Why is it necessary to kill these sharks that are under so much pressure from other sources when it’s not necessary? They are being killed solely for the sake of a contest, when you can still have the contest without the killing.

3. We’re not going to impact the ecosystem by killing a few sharks.

Overall fishermen are killing a lot more than a few sharks, and killing large sharks has very serious impacts on the environment.

As top predators, sharks help to manage healthy ocean ecosystems. Sharks as apex predators can regulate species abundance, distribution and diversity, which in turn can impact the health of marine habitats. Additionally, they provide essential food sources for scavengers and remove the sick and weak from populations of prey species. As the number of large sharks declines, the oceans will suffer unpredictable and devastating consequences – both ecologically and economically. (Source: Predators as Prey – Oceana 2008)

For example:

Declines in large shark populations on the East Coast of the US led to the collapse of North Carolina’s century-old bay scallop fishery. (Source: Cascading Effects of the Loss of Apex Predatory Sharks from a Coastal Ocean – Ransom A. Myers – Dalhousie University – 2007).

A study by Enric Sala of Scripps Institute of Oceanography suggests that the loss of sharks may have contributed to the decline of reefs in the Caribbean, most of which are now dominated by algae. (Source: New Scientist – April 23, 2005)

Studies of remote, pristine ecosystems on the other hand, demonstrate the positive impacts of the presence of sharks, including greater biodiversity, larger numbers of fish and healthier sea grass beds in areas with healthy populations of sharks as compared to similar systems in which the sharks have been overfished. (Source: High apex predator biomass on remote Pacific Islands. Stanford University)

4. Sharks are pests that are competing with humans for valuable food fish. If we kill sharks, there will be more fish for us.

See # 3. Depleting sharks threatens the balance and health of the whole ecosystem, which in turn leads to less life supported by the system.

Sharks have been known to interfere with the sportfishermen's catches by "stealing" hooked fish. This is an annoyance for sure, but for the fisherman this is not a struggle for survival – it's a sport. Challenges are inherent in any sport. Trying to stack the odds in your favor by killing off the natural predators of sport fishes is not very sportsmanlike. It's also detrimental to the long term health of the ocean on which the sport depends.

5. You should go after the commercial fishermen and leave us alone. Recreational fishermen are limited to one or two sharks per day, depending on the state.

Yes there are recreational bag limits for sharks, but there is no limit as to how many fishermen can kill sharks and no annual quotas.

"With over ten million saltwater recreational anglers in the US, and recreational fishing activity growing as much as 20% in the last 10 years, their aggregate impact is far from benign", Will Figueira of Duke University – co-author of study on the impacts of recreational fishing published in the Journal of Science, August 2004. This study also reveals "at the regional level, recreational catches for species of concern (as identified by the Federal government) made up 64% of landings in the Gulf of Mexico, 38% in South Atlantic and 59% along the Pacific Coast. "

6. The big problem is shark finning. Why don't you go after the shark finners and longliners, and leave us alone?

Yes the killing of sharks for shark fin soup is the leading cause of declining shark populations. The people and organizations who are urging recreational fishermen to stop killing sharks are also very involved with campaigns to reduce demand for shark fin soup and to impose stricter international controls on shark fishing.

If recreational fishermen are aware of the shark fin soup problem and are aware that 100 million sharks are being killed every year and that shark populations are plummeting, then how does it make sense to kill them for a contest? Not only kill sharks, but kill the largest and strongest, the productive and often pregnant females of the species? Would it be o.k. to have an elephant hunting tournament and say that you're doing nothing wrong because the ivory poachers are the real problem?

7. Bringing in big sharks and hanging them up for display is what attracts people to the event. It won't be successful if we don't do this.

Jack Donlon, director of the Are You Man Enough? Shark Challenge 3 on June 6 and 7 at Fort Myers Beach, said he decided Wednesday to make the event a no-kill tournament after he learned this week how passionate advocates are about protecting sharks.

"I'm not passionate about killing sharks", Donlon said. "I was just putting on a tournament. This was the best move for our tournament. It's going to expand our ability to put on a bigger event each and

every year.” “This is the way of the future”, Donlon said. “I don’t think the bring-‘em-back division was going to help us.” (Source: News-Press.com – May 2008)

“ESPN previously documented the Oaks Bluff Monster Shark Tournament in Massachusetts, but decided it was time to advance the sport and create a shark tournament that was catch-and-release. It turned out the catch-and-release format was not only popular with the conservation organizations, but also with the fans.” (Source: The evolution of a shark tournament – ESPN.com – March 19, 2008) The ESPN Quiznos Madfin Shark Tournament is now an award winning and top rated series.

Even Frank Mundus, the “Monster Man of Montauk”, turned to shark conservation after witnessing the impacts of overfishing on shark populations. Before he passed away, Frank hosted a Shark Tournament in Costa Rica in which no sharks were killed. Instead this tournament helped shark research by photographing, identifying, measuring, tagging and releasing all sharks caught. He also promoted the use of circle hooks and specially designed leaders to minimize trauma and injury to the captured sharks. (Source: CrocodileBay.com – Shark Tournament)

8. The event is raising money for charity. Shark conservationists care more about sharks than about people in need.

There is no reason why the event can’t continue and raise just as much money for charity. Just change it to catch and release.

The 7 Mile Marina Marathon Sharkathon is a 100% catch and release shark tournament that benefits Grace Jones Day Care Center and the Marathon Affiliate of the Disabled American Veterans. This tournament also requires the use of non-offset circle hooks. The killing of a shark, whether intentional or not, will result in automatic disqualification of the entire team. (Source: Florida Sportfishing March 18, 2009)

Kill shark tournaments are always the subject of intense controversy. Is it really fair to associate these charities with such a negative event and bring them into the center of a controversy that could potentially jeopardize other contributions?

9. We donate the shark meat to homeless shelters. It would be terrible to deny this gift of free food to people in need.

Shark meat, especially the meat from large sharks contains unsafe amounts of mercury and other toxins. Since mercury is a persistent toxin, large long-lived predators like sharks accumulate more and more of it as they age and consume more fish, through a process called biomagnification.

Shark meat carries warnings from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Environmental Defense Fund, Seafood Watch, and the Florida Department of Health, and many other organizations. Because of the health risks associated with the high mercury content in shark meat, most health organizations advise that women of child-bearing age and children should not consume any shark meat at all, and everyone else should limit consumption to no more than one serving per month. The Florida Dept. of Health goes further to warn that EVERYONE should avoid eating meat from any sharks over 43 inches.

“Citing both the health risks of consuming mercury-laden shark meat and concern over the way the sharks are captured, Long Island Cares Inc. – The Harry Chapin Food Bank, said it will pass on the

6,000 pounds of shark meat it has accepted annually from Long Island shark tournaments.” (Source: NY Daily News – June 8, 2008)

Aside from the mercury issue, what about the huge cash prizes involved with these tournaments? When the cash prizes range from tens of thousands to hundreds of thousands of dollars, wouldn't it be more charitable to donate some of that money to the homeless shelters?

Donating shark meat to homeless shelters is simply an excuse. You don't see tuna tournaments donating their catch to homeless shelters, do you?

10. The sharks killed are donated to scientists and provide valuable specimens to further scientists' understanding of sharks.

“From a scientific perspective, a live shark is much more valuable than a dead shark. A priority in recent shark research is delineating and characterizing areas important to the life-history and ecology of sharks. This is mostly done through tagging studies. In fact, scientists rely on fisherman to capture, report, and re-release tagged sharks for ongoing studies. In addition, there is no need to kill a shark to obtain tissue samples for DNA and most toxicology studies. This is because for DNA and most toxicology studies, a tiny amount of tissue is required. This can be obtained non-lethally from a very small fin clip or biopsy. This is similar for human DNA tests, where only a single hair is needed (and not the whole person). In fact, if possible, it would be most advantageous for scientists to examine changes in tissue toxin concentration through time, which can only be done through responsible catch, sample and release. Thus, tournaments or fishermen looking to support shark research should work with shark researchers to support and conduct responsible catch, tag, sample and release.” Neil Hammerschlag, Shark Scientist, University of Miami Rosenstiel School of Marine and Atmospheric Science.

11. Displaying dead sharks is the only way many people will get a chance to see these magnificent predators up close. Kids, especially, are fascinated by sharks and want to see them up close.

Do we take our children to the zoo or aquarium to see dead animals? Glorifying killing for cash and displaying the bloody corpses of these animals is no way to educate kids or anyone else about sharks. Really what exactly will they learn from this display?

There are many positive ways to educate people about sharks. A shark film festival is one example.

12. Sharks kill people, and we need to keep their numbers under control.

Sharks rarely kill people. Your lifetime risk of being the victim of a fatal shark attack is 1 in 3,748,067. Compare that to the 1 in 5,051 chance of dying in an air or space accident, and I would say you have lots more to worry about than sharks. From 2000 to 2007, there were 4,495 fatal hunting accidents in the US and Canada. During this same time period there were 7 fatal shark attacks. Between 1995 and 2007 there were 3,309 boating fatalities in the US. During this time there were 8 shark fatalities (average .6 per year). This is not to say that a fatal shark is not tragic. Of course it is. But dogs, elephants snakes, mountain lions, and many other animals all claim more human lives than sharks, and we don't have tournaments to kill these animals. Let's keep things in perspective. (Source: The relative risk of shark attacks to humans relative to other risks – Florida Museum of Natural History – International Shark Attack File).

13. It's legal and therefore it's our right to kill sharks.

Just because it's legal doesn't mean it's ethical or responsible.

David McRee – Author of the Best Florida Beaches blog – March 6, 2008 – in response to the killing of female great hammerhead for a record:

“I like to fish, and I'm no far-left tree-hugger, but at some point we all have to realize that there are just too many people fishing now to be continuing to kill off the dwindling population of large sharks, just for “sport”. What kind of sport is that?

I want my grandchildren and great-grandchildren to be able to see the graceful beauty of the giant hammerheads. For those who might quote the Bible and say that man has dominion over the earth, I don't challenge that at all. But with that honored place of holding dominion comes the responsibility of stewardship.”

I think that's a fitting quote to sum up this report!

NOTE: When we talk with shark fishermen tournament directors about changing to catch and release, it's extremely important to make sure they understand why they need to use circle hooks vs J hooks. J hooks more often than not wind up “gut hooking” the animal. Once they've been gut hooked, their chances for survival are slim to none. Hook removal devices are also highly recommended. And rules to minimize stress and injury to the sharks, such as “no gaffing” are important as well.