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THE EVERYTHING OCEAN
DIGITAL MAGAZINE

FEATURE

The history of
Shark Fishing

INSIGHT

Gulper Sharks





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Editor's Letter

Dear readers,

In September, we celebrated the ratification of the High Seas Treaty. This crucial agreement has been years in the making, and to see it finally cross the finish line was a victory that was long fought and hard won. Just as we took a little time to celebrate this one victory, another blow came from one of the most celebrated diving and underwater destinations in the world - the island nation of the Maldives.

Maldives has long been the diving capital and jewel of South Asia, and in October, The Maldives government has announced that the country will reopen a fishery targeting gulper sharks from November 2025. The fishery is said to allow a limited number of vessels from (*“only 40 vessels will be licensed”* under new regulation) to target gulper sharks, from December each year until end of June.

It is difficult to understand the rationale behind such a move, as the Maldives is a extremely popular scuba diving destination and most of its tourism revenue comes from activities such as scuba diving (One estimate cited USD14.4 million direct dive-revenue + USD51.4 million in local benefits - far higher than the short-term extractive value of a collapsed deep-water shark fishery.) The Maldives imposed a total ban on shark fishing in 2010, following earlier restrictions since 1998. The Maldives is (or was) recognized as one of only 17 'shark sanctuaries' in the world where commercial shark fishing is banned.



In retrospect, when shark fishing was legal in the Maldives, gulper shark populations reportedly fell by ~97% between 1982 and 2002, when targeting occurred. The fishery collapsed in less than a decade. A reopened gulper fishery could repeat that scenario, unless scientific assessments confirm stock recovery and sustainable yield levels (which are currently not clear).

The Maldives' international conservation standing, commitments (e.g., under CITES, regional fisheries bodies) would be under scrutiny; stakeholder backlash (conservation groups, tourism industry, public) is significant.

While the world watches in shock the current step taken by the Maldivian government, it brings to fore the question I have long thought of, but failed to find an answer to - Will, ultimately, human priorities take precedence over the biodiversity of life that exists on the planet? It feels like we constantly shoot ourselves in the foot.

In an ever changing, under crisis world, it feels like there is really nowhere else to hide from missteps. Public pressure is paramount to change this government policy, and another long battle awaits us.

In this issue of 70%, we dive into the history of shark fishing, and our feature topic is about Gulper sharks.

Happy reading, and the battle continues.

On behalf of the 70% editorial team,
Suhas





Cover photo:
Shark Fin.

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A Tawny Nurse Shark at Alimatha Jetty, Maldives [@oceanblueimaging](#)

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FEATURE

Shark Fishing

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It is the year 960AD. The Emperor of China is having his dinner. The dinner starts with a bowl of soup, popular in elite Chinese cuisine as a traditional way to start a meal. However, this is no ordinary soup. This is a shark fin soup. The emperor is from the Song Dynasty in China.

The earliest records of shark fin soup comes from the Song Dynasty (960-1279AD). Shark fin soup later became a favored dish among elites during the Ming dynasty's rule of China (1368-1644AD) and into the Qing dynasty (1644-1912AD). This was the period in which shark fin soup became associated with luxury, status, and formal dining - a practice that has continued into current day Chinese cuisine.

Shark fishing has ancient roots—coastal communities worldwide have hunted sharks for meat, oil, leather and bait for centuries—but it became industrialized in the 20th century. In the 1930s–40s, demand for shark liver oil (rich in vitamin A) and shark leather drove the development of commercial shark fisheries in North America and beyond.

With economic reforms and growth across the globe, the reasons for shark fishing have shifted over time. . Historically sharks were taken for local meat, oil and hide. In the late 20th century a lucrative international fin trade—driven by demand for shark-fin soup in parts of Asia—exploded, while increasing global market channels turned many regional fisheries into international suppliers. At the same time, fishing fleets started venturing our farther and farther to satisfy global demand for shark fin as local fisheries plummeted. Sharks were also frequently taken as bycatch in Tuna and Swordfish fisheries.



As wealth in China and other south east Asian countries expanded significantly during the 20th century, the middle (and upper) classes grew. More people could afford luxury foods. Demand for shark fins surged: trade in fins more than doubled between 1985 and 2001, reflecting increased consumption. This in turn drove a surge in demand for shark fin, and many fisheries become international suppliers.

Because shark fin soup is expensive and regarded as a high-status dish, it was commonly served at weddings, banquets, business dinners and other special occasions—used to project wealth, honor guests, and signal prestige. This social signaling, combined with widespread availability through expanding trade networks, global Chinese diaspora, and restaurant markets, transformed shark fin soup from an elite item into a more broadly consumed symbol of prosperity. Cultural beliefs have driven demand as well. Traditional beliefs amplify its status: shark fins are thought in some circles to have health-related or “restorative” properties. These claims include enhancing “qi”, vitality, and other benefits, though scientific evidence supporting medicinal value is lacking.



As global demand for shark fin exploded in the late 20th century, so too did the lucrateness of the international shark fin trade. This led to a surge in modernization of fisheries, and fishing techniques. small-scale coastal capture evolved into industrial longlining, gillnetting and trawling, plus targeted pelagic fleets operating hundreds of miles offshore. Many countries operated (and continue to operate fishing fleets, often illegally) that operate far and wide across the high seas, unregulated by law. Between 1985 and 2001, global shark-fin trade volumes more than doubled.



Some of the countries most frequently cited as landing large volumes of sharks or having high demand:

- Indonesia: Frequently identified as the world's top shark-fishing nation (or among the top).
- India: Ranks second in one WWF assessment among shark-fishing nations.
- Spain: Appears in recent analyses as one of the major shark-fishing nations with a major Atlantic fleet targeting pelagic sharks.
- Mexico & United States: Also cited in modern data as among the countries with substantial industrial shark fishing fleet. with high amount of bycatch.
- Other nations: Some sources list additional large catchers such as Taiwan (ROC), Japan, South Africa, Sri Lanka.

The global demand for shark meat is driven by Asian and the European Union. Japan has a sizeable market for fresh and frozen shark meat (often used in surimi, fish paste and fish sausage products). The EU accounts for about 22% of global shark meat trade, with Italy often cited as one of the highest paying importers of shark meat.

Shark fins see the highest demand in south east Asian countries - Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Korea, and Singapore.

The key processing hubs for shark fin and shark meat are Hong Kong which has a global center for fin processing and re-export. Costa Rica is a major hub for landing sharks caught in the fisheries of Latin America.





Shark fin soup

Shark fins and a dead hammerhead shark, West Java.



This global appetite has had devastating consequences. Studies estimate that over 80 million sharks are killed annually, with populations of oceanic species declining by more than 70 percent since 1970. Iconic sharks such as the hammerhead, oceanic whitetip, and mako have suffered catastrophic collapses due to overfishing and bycatch in tuna fleets.

Some of the highly exploited shark species are outlined below:

- Scalloped hammerhead shark (*Sphyrna lewini*) — This species is heavily targeted for its large fins (valuable in the fin-trade) and is also caught as bycatch. It is assessed by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) as Critically Endangered. The population decline in some regions has been over 90 % over 30 years.
- Great hammerhead shark (*Sphyrna mokarran*) — Also targeted (especially for fins), and suffers high bycatch mortality. The IUCN lists it as globally Critically Endangered.
- Oceanic whitetip shark (*Carcharhinus longimanus*) — Once very abundant, large declines due to pelagic longline fisheries (target and bycatch) and the fin trade.
- Shortfin mako shark and Longfin mako shark — Both are heavily fished for meat (especially mako steaks), fins, and sport-fishing.

Broadly speaking, no shark is safe from shark fishing. Many “large-bodied, oceanic, slow-to-mature” shark species face the greatest pressure. A 2021 study found open-ocean sharks and rays have declined ~71 % since 1970 owing to an 18-fold increase in fishing pressure.

A 2024 paper estimated global shark fishing mortality rose from ~76 million sharks in 2012 to >80 million annually in 2017, averaging ~79 million from 2017–19.



Recognition of declining stocks led to policy milestones. The FAO's International Plan of Action for the Conservation and Management of Sharks (IPOA-Sharks) was finalized and endorsed in 1998–1999, urging countries to develop national plans. In 2013 a landmark CITES decision added several commercially traded shark species (and manta rays) to Appendix II, requiring trade controls; further listings followed in later years.

It is important to notice that CITES does not ban shark finning or shark fishing. CITES is a framework that regulates. By listing key species in Appendix II (and in a few cases Appendix I, such as saw-fishes) the trade in fins/parts for those species is now supposed to be regulated — requiring permits and NDFs. While this has helped raise awareness, create identification tools and build capacity in countries to monitor shark fin and meat exports, regulations alone are not sufficient. They do not stop over-fishing and bycatch in large fisheries remains the biggest unresolved threat.. The combination of targeted capture + bycatch + fins + meat continues to push declines. Iconic shark populations remain face high extinction risk despite trade regulation.

Weak enforcement, illegal finning, and poorly monitored bycatch continue to drive declines. Despite progress, industrial fishing and global trade still threaten sharks at unsustainable levels—making stronger governance, data transparency, and international cooperation crucial for ensuring their survival.

As the world pushes forward and global population grows, the vanguards of the oceans are under constant threat. Between a hungry global market, and a declining natural world, sharks stand as a stark example of how human demand and greed can be the harbinger of the end to an iconic ocean species.





Shark sanctuaries and shark tourism provide far greater economic benefits to a region than shark fishing and finning.

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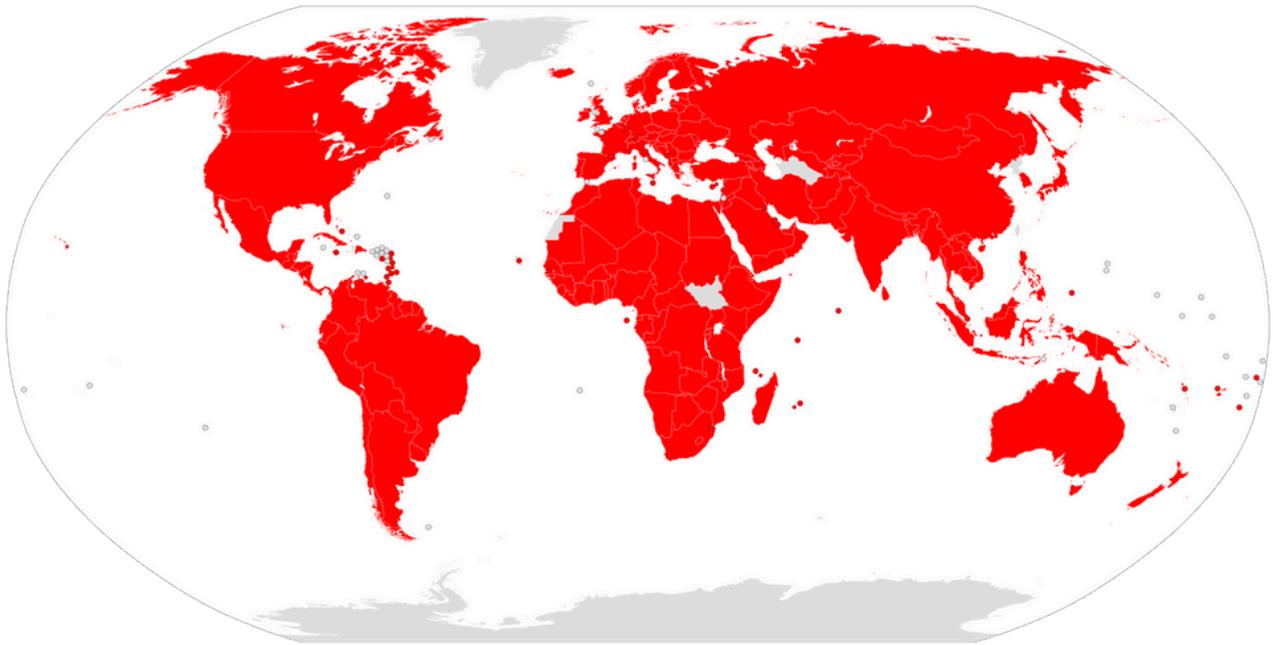
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CITES

**Protecting Wildlife Through
Global Trade Controls**

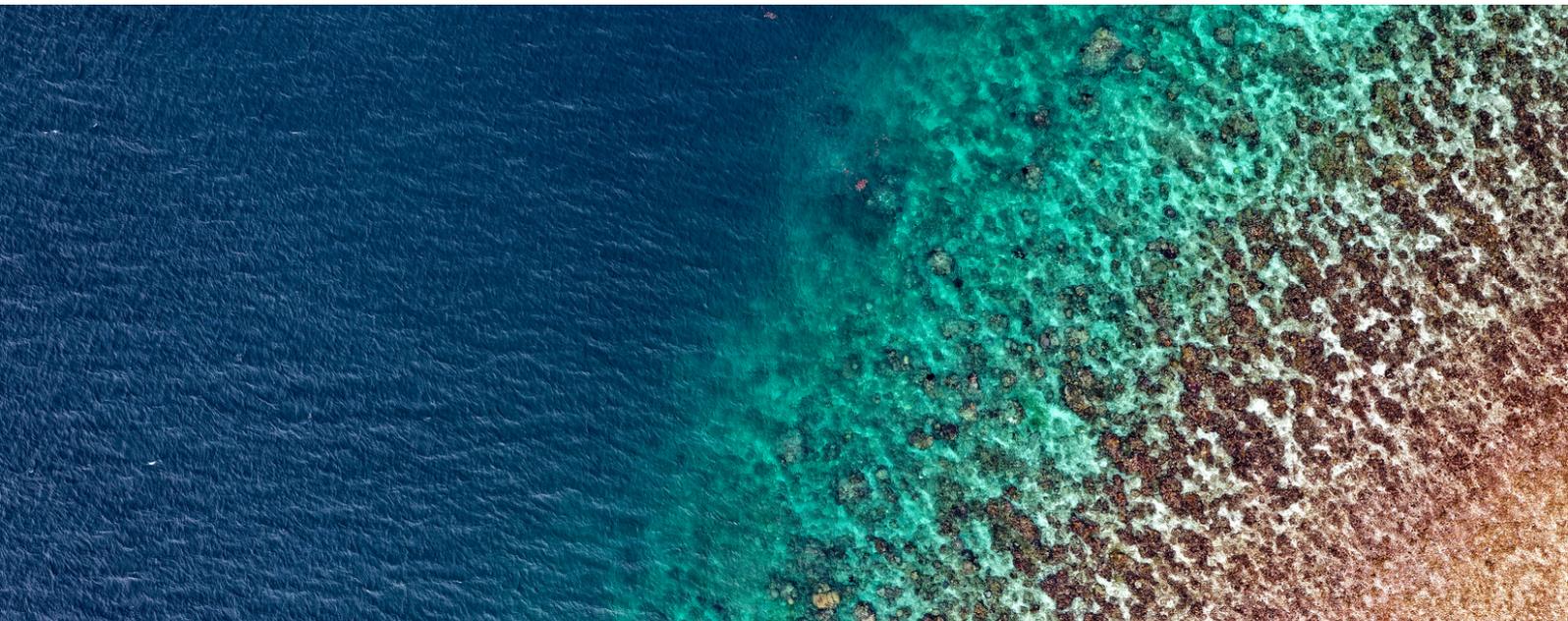
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CITES – the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora – is an international agreement between governments created in 1973 to ensure that global wildlife trade does not threaten species' survival. Today, 184 member nations regulate the movement of endangered plants and animals across borders.



What does CITES do?

- Regulates international trade, not domestic fishing or hunting.
- Covers over 38,000 species, including many sharks and rays.
- Uses a permit system to ensure trade is sustainable and legal.

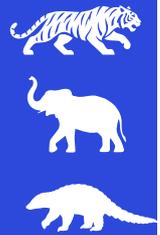


How does CITES work?

CITES categorizes species into three Appendices based on how threatened they are and how much trade controls are needed.

APPENDIX I

- Species at highest risk of extinction.
- Commercial trade is banned.
- Examples: sawfishes, great apes, certain big cats.



APPENDIX II

- Species not yet endangered but could become so without controls.
- Trade allowed with strict permits and sustainability findings.
- Most CITES-listed sharks fall here.



APPENDIX III

- Species protected within a country asking other nations for assistance.
- Trade allowed with documentation.



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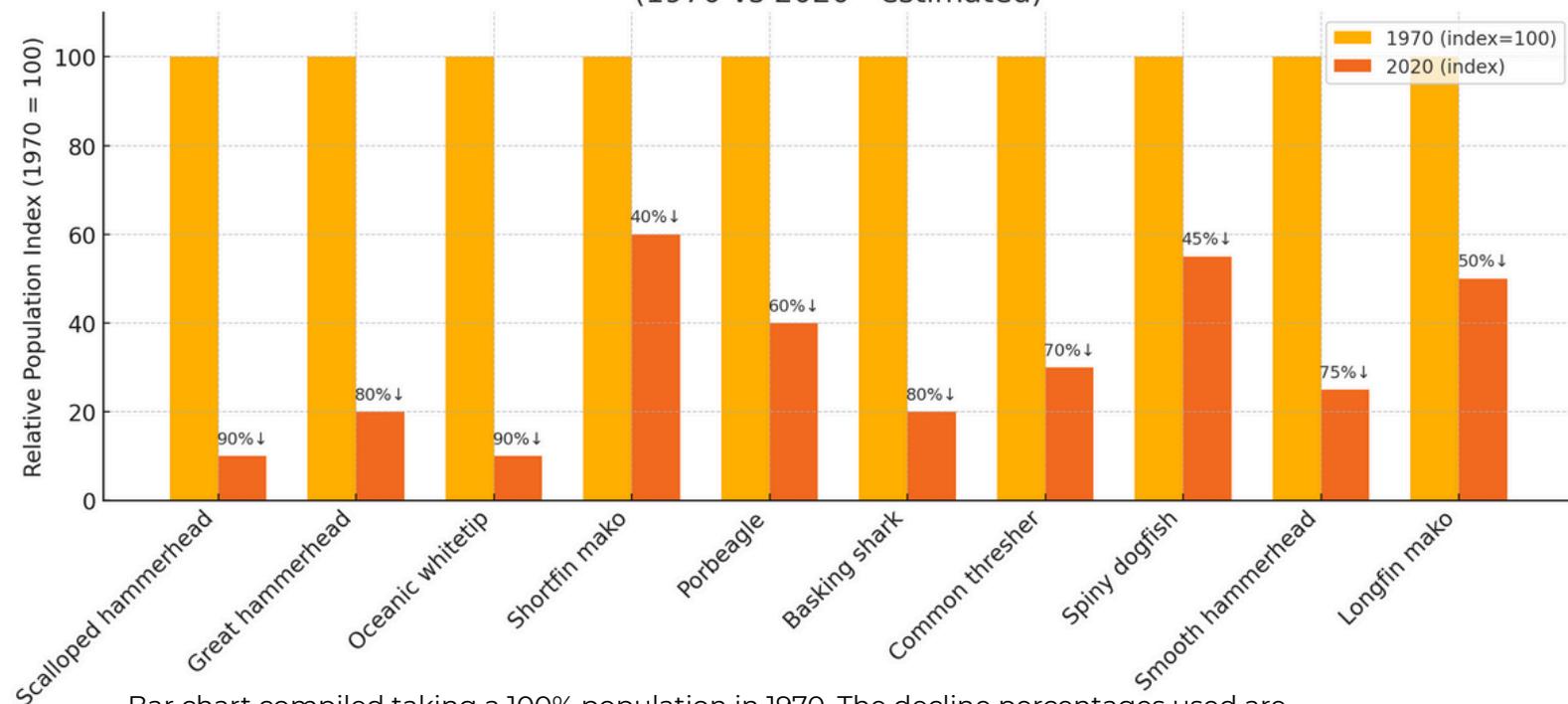
CITES and sharks

Sharks are vulnerable because they grow slowly, mature late, and have few offspring. Industrial fishing, bycatch, and the global fin and meat trades have caused populations of many species to collapse.

CITES began listing sharks in 2003, and today over 130 shark and ray species are protected under its Appendices.

- Key Listed Species:
- Hammerheads (scalloped, great, smooth)
- Oceanic whitetip shark
- Shortfin and longfin mako sharks
- Thresher sharks
- Wedgefishes and giant guitarfishes (critically endangered)

Illustrative Declines for 10 Highly Threatened Shark Species (1970 vs 2020 - estimated)



Bar chart compiled taking a 100% population in 1970. The decline percentages used are illustrative estimates compiled from IUCN assessments, scientific papers and conservation summaries. Exact declines vary by region, stock, and the time span used by each study.



How CITES protects sharks

- CITES regulates the international movement of shark products such as:
- Fins
- Meat
- Squalene (liver oil)
- Skin and leather
- Cartilage

- To export a CITES-listed shark product, countries must prove the trade is legal and sustainable through:
- Export Permits
- Non-Detriment Findings (NDFs) showing the species is not being overfished
- Verification of source and processing
- Seizures of illegal shipments

- Many listed sharks were declining by 70–95% before regulation.
- CITES creates accountability in a trade that was historically unmonitored. (still not sufficient)
- It pushes countries to adopt stronger fisheries management.



Challenges & the future of shark protection

Ongoing problems

- Illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing
- Difficulty identifying shark products once dried or processed
- Limited resources to enforce trade bans
- Bycatch in tuna and swordfish fisheries
- High demand in fin and meat markets

Future priorities

- Better species-specific catch data
- Strengthening port inspections and DNA testing
- Expanding “fins-attached” policies to end illegal finning
- More international cooperation between customs agencies
- Supporting countries to produce accurate NDFs
- Public awareness to reduce demand

CITES remains one of the most powerful global tools for protecting sharks. The survival of many species depends on strong trade regulation, scientific management, and continued conservation pressure.





Tiger Sharks at Fuvahmulah, the Maldives. Fuvamulah boasts one of the highest densities of Tiger sharks in the indo-pacific.

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INSIGHT

Gulper Sharks



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The Gulper shark (*Centrophorus granulosus*) lives far beneath the surface, typically between 300 to 1,400 meters deep. They belong to the dogfish family (*Centrophoridae*) and are found in deep continental slopes and submarine ridges across the world's temperate and tropical oceans.

Known for their slow movements, large eyes, and leaf-shaped teeth, gulpers are perfectly adapted for life in the dark.

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Gulper sharks have enlarged, reflective eyes that help them see in near darkness. Their gray-brown body and smooth, velvety skin help them blend into dim environments.



Gulpers are slow-moving nocturnal predators that feed mainly on bony fish, squid, and crustaceans. Their name comes from their unique feeding behavior — they "gulp" down prey whole, using suction and sharp teeth to catch slippery deep-sea creatures.

They often move alone or in small groups, conserving energy in the cold, high-pressure depths. Unlike many sharks, gulpers have no anal fin, and their dorsal fins are spiny, offering defense against predators.

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Gulper sharks have extremely slow growth rates, late maturity, and low reproductive output — traits common in deep-sea species. Females give birth to 1 or 2 pups after a long gestation period. This makes Gulper shark populations highly vulnerable to overfishing.

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Gulper sharks are found in scattered populations across the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Oceans — from the Mediterranean Sea to the coasts of Australia and Japan.

Despite their wide distribution, localized populations are declining rapidly, particularly in regions with deep-sea trawl and longline fisheries.

The Maldives, Portugal, Japan, and parts of the Indian Ocean are known hotspots where Gulper sharks have been heavily fished.

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Their large oil-filled liver provides buoyancy, allowing them to glide effortlessly. These oils, once sought after for squalene — used in cosmetics, supplements, and pharmaceuticals — have become the cause of their decline.

Landing of Gulper Sharks in Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Indian Ocean.

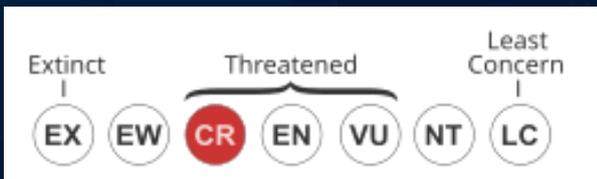
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Gulpers are among the most threatened deep-sea sharks today.

Overfishing for liver oil (squalene) and bycatch in deep-sea trawling have caused drastic population crashes — in some areas, by over 90%. Their slow reproduction means populations cannot recover quickly.

Many species of Gulper shark are now listed as Critically Endangered by the IUCN Red List. Conservation efforts focus on fishing bans, catch limits, and CITES protections.

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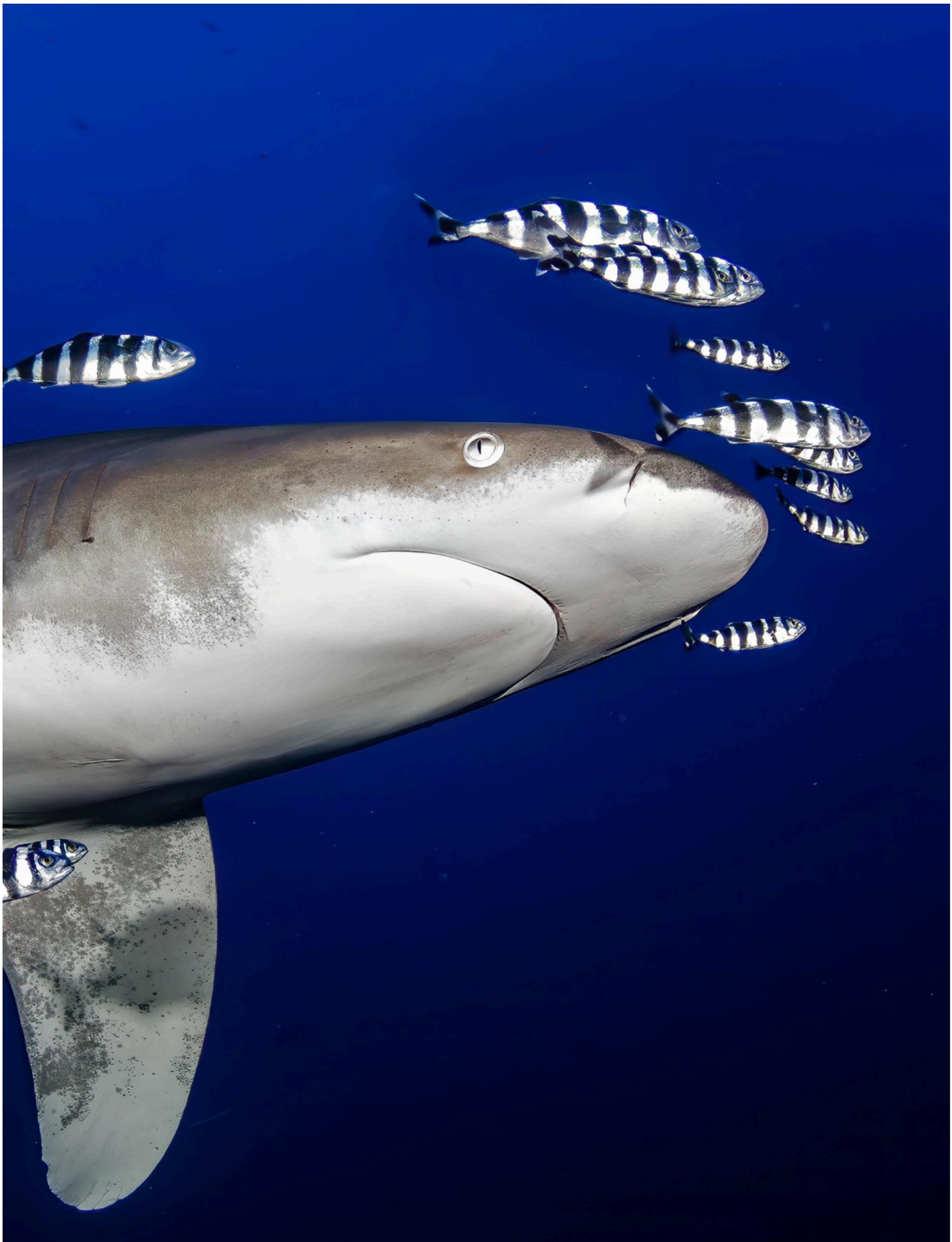
Protecting Gulper sharks means protecting the deep-sea ecosystem. They play a key role in controlling prey populations and cycling nutrients in the ocean's twilight zone.

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An Oceanic white tip shark patrols the waters of the Red Sea.

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