

ENVIRONMENT

A quick visit to the six no. Fisheries Ghat in the busy tourist town of Cox's Bazar and you will be greeted with the intense smell of the town's sludge flowing into the sea, and busy fishermen screaming their lungs out auctioning off their day's catch of sea fish in all shapes and sizes.

Boat after boat dock by the derelict fish market and unload their catch. To even the naked eye, it becomes obvious there is something unusual about the catch. Mingled with the usual sea-fish fare are endangered Hammerhead sharks, Tiger sharks and many different kinds of rays—some as broad as the rugs in your living room!

Some of the sharks and ray species that land in these markets, to be eventually processed and traded, are globally 'Threatened, Vulnerable or Endangered' and their unregulated, fishing and often illegal trade will threaten their existence more with extinction.

"We have to ensure our fishermen begin to understand sharks and rays are slow-growing species and they cannot be harvested commercially," says Jahidul Kabir, Conservator of Forests, Wildlife & Nature Conservation Circle of the Bangladesh Forest Department

However, catching sharks and rays brings much needed extra income to the poor fishermen in the region. And what is even worse is it is not always the poor fishermen but the traders who enjoy the ultimate profit. The fishermen who don't have their own boats only get the salary, says Alifa Bintha Haque, lecturer at the Department of Zoology at Dhaka University.



The skins of Guitar fishes are left out in the open for drying. The skin is consumed as food and also used as leather for accessories.

PHOTO: ALIFA BINTHA HAQUE

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FIGHTING TO SAVE THE GIANTS OF THE SEAS

After page 6

In terms of a legal framework, the two most important regulatory instruments to conserve wildlife and fish in Bangladesh are the *Protection and Conservation of Fish Act, 1950* and *Wildlife (Conservation and Security) Act, 2012*. The former, which falls under the jurisdiction of the Department of Fisheries, does not contain any provision to protect sharks and rays. However, the *Wildlife (Conservation and Security) Act, 2012*, which falls under the jurisdiction of the Bangladesh Forest Department, has the provision to protect species under threat from being exported or traded.

Only 23 species of shark and six species of rays are protected by the *Wildlife (Conservation and Security) Act, 2012*, and some species are protected under CITES, (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) an international agreement which Bangladesh is party to.

The problem though is that it is nearly impossible to determine the species when the products are processed.

Dr. AKM Aminul Haque from the Bangladesh's Department of Fisheries admits that the emphasis on



An endangered Giant freshwater whipray which is frequently caught in fishermen net.

PHOTO COURTESY: WILDLIFE CONSERVATION SOCIETY, BANGLADESH



The fresh skin of a Guitarfish is kept on the floor of a processing centre in Cox's Bazar. Three varieties of Guitarfish that were found in the processing centres were listed as 'Vulnerable' on the IUCN Red List.

PHOTOS: ALIFA BINTHA HAQUE



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No part of the shark or ray is discarded during processing and even the jaw and teeth is dried. They are worn as jewellery and is usually sold locally. They are also used by traditional medicine practitioners.



PHOTOS: ALIFA BINTHA HAQUE

The fins of different kinds of sharks being dried at a processing centre in Cox's Bazar. This is one of the principal shark product exported from Bangladesh.



The meat of sharks and rays is being dried in one of the processing centres. There is a niche domestic market for both dried and fresh meat, liver oil, jaws and teeth.

FIGHTING TO SAVE THE GIANTS OF THE SEAS

Uncovering processing of Shark and Ray products in Bangladesh, their trade and conservation actions

ABIDA RAHMAN CHOWDHURY

Not the primary catch

"Sharks are essentially by-catch which is not discarded and targeted by the fishermen as they recognise it is of high value and will bring them some extra income," says Alifa.

No part of the shark or ray is discarded during processing; products comprise fresh and dried meat, skin, vertebrae, jaws, teeth, dried whole fish, intestines and so on, she adds.

Bangladesh's mark in the global map as a big shark product producer and exporter cannot be ignored. In Cox's Bazar and Teknaf, processing centres were identified, during a study conducted to observe the processing of shark and ray products in Bangladesh, that have the capacity to turn over thousands of kilogrammes of sharks and rays each day of the year during peak season.

The products are exported to the international market to meet the demand of shark-fin soup, leather products and traditional medicine in China, Thailand and Myanmar. There is also a niche domestic market for dried and fresh meat, liver oil, jaws and teeth. They are sold to tribal groups and non-Muslim communities,

traditional medicine practitioners and also to the fish feed industry in Bangladesh.

Owing to a demand for these products in neighboring countries, many sharks and rays and their processed products are "exported" to Myanmar informally through the Teknaf region, according to a short note published on the TRAFFIC Bulletin.

What is important to understand here is that trade of sharks and ray products is not an ecologically sound idea as these species are slow growing. They reach sexual maturity sometimes at nine or ten years age and reproduce very minimal number of pups; and if this practice goes unabated, these species could be lost forever.

"Unlike commercially harvestable species such as Hilsa fish which lay thousands of eggs potentially producing a thousand other Hilsas each season, sharks are slow growing species and a sustainable management plan is required if there is a plan to harvest any particular species at all," opines Jahidul Kabir.

Absence of proper regulations and appropriate export documentation or evaluation of the sustainability of these fisheries means increased pressure on these marine megafaunas.

Is there any legal framework to help protect these species?

As we enter the eye of the great storm of extinction, wildlife and habitats all around the world continue to take blow after blow from economic development.



PHOTO: ALIFA BINTHA HAQUE

Local women working on drying small sharks. They are often dried with their skins as smaller sharks are not eligible for the skin trade.

For sharks and rays, in Bangladesh, a lack of baseline data and species-specific research on ecology and habitat use or catch patterns are some of the major challenges in coming up with a conservation action for these species.

Continued to page 7