Protecting White Sharks

White Sharks are listed on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List, as Vulnerable. Widely but sparsely distributed top predator with a very low reproductive potential (late maturity and small litter size) and high vulnerability to target and by-catch fisheries (commercial and recreational), some of which supply high-value products (fins, jaws, teeth) for international trade.

Gulf of the Farallones National Marine Sanctuary protects the wildlife and habitats of one of the most diverse and bountiful marine environments in the world. This area is one of the top four major upwelling areas in the world (large upwelling ecosystems border the western boundary of the great continents). These biologically and nutrient-rich waters provide sustenance for major populations of top predators including White Sharks.

White Sharks depend on the rich waters of the sanctuary, and as apex predators play a key role in maintaining a balanced ecosystem. Each fall, adult and sub-adult White Sharks frequent the waters of the sanctuary. Marine mammals are an important food source for adult and sub-adult White Sharks, particularly elephant seals, which have high fat content. White Sharks also feed on whale carcasses. They feed relatively infrequently and may only eat a few seals while in the sanctuary. It is important not to interfere during a predation event. White Sharks expend a significant amount of energy migrating across the Pacific and need to store as much energy as possible during their short feeding season in sanctuary waters.

Sanctuary Regulations to Protect White Sharks

To protect one of the most important White Shark populations in the world, NOAA/Office of National Marine Sanctuaries has enacted regulations to ensure sharks are not disturbed by unauthorized activities.

Federal Regulations prohibit (15 CFR Part 922):

1. Attracting a White Shark anywhere in Gulf of the Farallones or Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuaries.
2. Approaching within 50 meters (164 ft.) of any White Shark within 2 nautical miles (2.3 miles; 3.7 km) of any of the Farallon Islands.

Attract or attracting means the conduct of any activity that lures or may lure any animal in the Sanctuary by using food, bait, chum, dyes, decoys (e.g., surfboards or body boards used as decoys), acoustics or any other means, except the mere presence of human beings (e.g., swimmers, divers, boaters, kayakers, surfers).

Protected in California

White Sharks have been protected in California waters since January 1994. Title 14, California Code of Regulations, Fish and Game states that White Sharks may not be taken. However, the unintentional catch of sharks in the commercial fishing industry (long-line, purse seine, gillnets and mid-water trawl fisheries) threaten sharks, particularly juvenile White Sharks in southern California.

The Shared Off-shore Foraging Area (SOFA) or the “White Shark Cafe” is roughly 1,300 miles from the California coast. Adult White Sharks are seen most frequently along the coast from Tomales Pt., south to Ano Nuevo Island and west to the Farallon Islands, where concentrations of seals and sea lions are found. This area is known as the “Red Triangle.”

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White sharks are globally distributed apex predators.

White Sharks are found in temperate and sub-tropical waters. The best-known coastal aggregations of White Sharks include:

- Australia/New Zealand (Feb. to Oct.); Estimated population is 133 (juveniles, sub-adults)
- South Africa (Apr. to Oct.); Estimated population is 908 (across all age classes)
- Northwest Atlantic (migrate between New England and Florida); Population size is unknown (emerging aggregation off Cape Cod, Massachusetts)
- Northeastern Pacific: Estimated population for entire NEP population is ~3000 (across all age classes)

* Tomales Pt., Pt. Reyes, Año Nuevo, Farallon Islands (Aug. to Nov.): Estimated population is 219 (adults, sub-adults)
* Guadalupe Island, MX (Jul. to Jan.): Estimated population is 135 (adults, sub-adults)

Most sharks are slow to reach reproductive maturity and produce only a small number of young each year, making them highly susceptible to the threats of fishing and other human activities.

According to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), 32% of pelagic sharks and rays are threatened with extinction (critically endangered, endangered, or vulnerable) – 24% are near threatened; 19% are of least concern (least concern, data deficient, or vulnerable) – 24% are near threatened; 19% are of least concern and 25% are data deficient.

Many sharks, including Whites Sharks, are highly migratory and don’t stay within jurisdictional boundaries, making protection challenging. Threats include:

- Demand for shark fin soup
- Curio trade
- Incidental catch
- Recreational fishing
- Environmental pollutants
- Habitat deterioration and loss (including loss of prey species)
- Unregulated tourism

Debunk the myth — we are more of a threat to them than they are to us. It is estimated that over 100 million sharks are killed annually by humans; on average, 10 people are killed each year, worldwide by sharks. You are 15 times more likely to be killed by a falling coconut than by a shark – about 150 people die each year from coconuts.

Common myths have vilified White Sharks.

You can help

The information you share with others plays a critical role in the protection of the species. Learn more about White Sharks and the threats they face!

- Be aware of efforts that protect sharks and the ocean, such as the one signed into law on October 7, 2011 in the State of California (AB 376), which provides added protection to sharks by banning the possession, sale, trade, and distribution of shark fins in California.
- Get involved with organizations protecting sharks.
- Choose seafood that is harvested sustainably.
- Be aware of international efforts to foster conservation.