



## Scientists meet to halt shark and ray declines

On Monday, international experts will gather in Plymouth for the annual conference of the Fisheries Society of the British Isles (FSBI) hosted by the Marine Biological Association of the UK (MBA) and Plymouth University, to discuss ways of using new science and technology to help sustainably manage shark, skate and ray populations.

Many shark, skate and ray (known collectively as elasmobranchs) populations around the world are coming under increasing pressure from overfishing, habitat loss and pollution due to human activities. Recent assessments indicate that one quarter of all 1,041 species are threatened with extinction, mainly as a result of overfishing. Worryingly, for many of the species taken there is currently little or no management to limit catches.

“The decline in sharks, skates and rays is truly alarming and a global phenomenon, which is why the FSBI conference draws together scientists from 34 countries to find innovative solutions to this and other problems” says the conference convenor Professor David Sims of the MBA in Plymouth.

One problem is that for better regulation of fisheries it is vital to know precisely where the sharks and rays are at given times of the year. Without this basic data it is questionable whether existing conservation strategies such as marine protected areas (MPAs) can adequately protect them.

“The conference will explore how new technologies, such as satellite monitoring, shark-tracking robots, genetic and mathematical analysis techniques, can improve understanding of how sharks and rays use the ocean, and highlight which areas really need protecting and when” says Sims.

One of the keynote speakers at the conference is Dr Gregory Skomal who is travelling to Plymouth from the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution in the U.S.A.

“We have developed an autonomous underwater vehicle (AUV) capable of tracking and video-imaging the subsurface predatory behaviour of white sharks at depths greater than 50m” says Dr Skomal, a leading researcher of shark behaviour. Knowing first hand from AUVs why sharks swim where they do is one way to help understand which habitats they prefer.

New scientific approaches like this will be crucial for conservation because knowing when and where sharks and rays overlap with fishing gear could lead to management measures that reduce catch rates.



The FSBI conference on the “Biology, Ecology and Conservation of Elasmobranchs” will last all week (Monday 27th to Friday 31st July) with the proceedings published in an international scientific journal in December.

**Ends**

**Notes for editors:**

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**About the Marine Biological Association (MBA)**

The Marine Biological Association (MBA) is a professional body for marine scientists with some 1,400 members world-wide. Since 1884 the MBA has established itself as a leading marine biological research organization with its own Research Laboratory and scientific staff in Plymouth. The MBA has contributed to the work of several Nobel Laureates and over 170 Fellows of the Royal Society, with staff scientists receiving major awards for their research including the Royal Society’s Royal Medal and the Japan International Prize in Biology. In 2013, the MBA was awarded a Royal Charter in recognition of its long and eminent history and its status within the field of marine biology. The award strengthens the Association’s role in promoting marine biology as a discipline and in representing the interests of the marine biological community. [www.mba.ac.uk](http://www.mba.ac.uk)

**About the Fisheries Society of the British Isles (FSBI)**

The FSBI is an international, non-political, learned society, based in the United Kingdom, that supports scientific activity in fish biology and management through charitable sponsorship. Membership is open to anyone interested in these objectives. We are registered in the United Kingdom as a charity and are affiliated to the Society of Biology and the Society for Science and Technology. The Society's aims to encourage, promote and support all branches of fish biology, and fisheries science and conservation. [www.fsbi.org.uk](http://www.fsbi.org.uk)

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