

PLENTY OF FISH IN THE SEA? SHARK FISHING AND THE FIN TRADE IN GHANA

MAX GELBER

I spent summer 2017 conducting research in the Western Region of Ghana as part of the Master of Sustainable Development Practice (MDP) program. This research was conducted with staff at *Hen Mpoano* (Our Coast), a nonprofit organization in Takoradi, Ghana that provides technical, policy, and extension support to coastal communities, civil society groups, and other stakeholders in fisheries and coastal ecosystem governance.

Sustainable Development Goal 14 highlights the critical role our oceans play in sustaining life on Earth, and calls for leaders around the world to intensify their commitments to protecting and conserving our oceans and marine resources. Part and parcel to ensuring the sustainability of our oceans and seas is protecting its innumerable species. My field practicum project draws much-needed attention to the Elasmobranch species, which include sharks, rays, and skates. The paper focuses predominately on shark species, which play a critical role in the ocean's food chain, and are currently under immense threat.

In Ghana, shark species are targeted and caught as bycatch. Both the targeted

and bycatch shark fisheries provide locally-consumed animal protein, and a source of income for artisanal fishermen. With regards to sharks specifically, meat is harvested for the local market, while fins and other products are destined for the lucrative export market.

Since the 1980s, following China's "reform and opening-up" period, shark fin consumption has grown substantially. High demand for shark fin in China has left global shark populations in peril. Heightened media attention and substantial lobbying from conservation organizations and celebrities has pressured governments to regulate and, in some cases, ban shark fin trading and the gruesome practice of shark finning. These efforts, along with changing tastes among youth and reported health concerns, have resulted in noticeable declines in shark fin consumption in China and elsewhere.

However, new markets and trade routes have emerged for shark fin and other products. At the same time, a significant paucity in fisheries and trade data, especially in developing countries, makes it difficult to assess the true extent of global shark populations and the prevailing trade in shark products. Furthermore, little attention has

been paid to smaller exporting nations, like Ghana, where a burgeoning trade in shark products has emerged to meet changing market demands. Inadequate catch/landings and socioeconomic data, especially at the artisanal level, hamper the ability of government and other key stakeholders to craft and implement sustainable fishery management policies that meets the present and future socioeconomic and environmental challenges presented by the trade.

My research fills in some of the missing pieces to the larger, complex puzzle of the global trade in shark products. Using semi-structured interviews, informal interviews, ethnographic observation, academic literature, grey literature, and international catch data, this research provides key socioeconomic and environmental data on the shark fin trade, and elucidates the complex linkages between actors in the shark fin supply chain, in three fishing communities in Ghana's Western Region: Shama, Dixcove, and Axim. Research findings reveal nuanced information that government and other key stakeholders can use to design and implement better management, conservation, and economic plans and policies with respect to local, national, and international shark fisheries. One such finding is that a number of vulnerable and threatened shark species are caught off the Ghanaian coast, including the Great White, Common Thresher, Hammerhead, and Sand Tiger, and that while shark catches have generally decreased, certain species, like Hammerhead, have almost completely disappeared from fishermen's catches.

Max J. Gelber is completing his Master of Sustainable Development Practice (MDP) degree, and certificates in African Studies and Tropical Conservation and Development, at UF. His summer field practicum was supported by the Center for African Studies, the Center for Latin American Studies, and Hen Mpoano, a Ghana-based environmental NGO. He is currently a FLAS fellow (Akan, 2016-18).

