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Culturally and economically valued

Sawfishes were revered for millennia by societies along the tropical and subtropical coasts of the Atlantic and Indo-Pacific Oceans. They were first used on coinage 5,000 years ago, and are still found on modern West African currency. Art, folklore, and mythology are almost all that is left today to remind us of how widespread and abundant these fishes once were.

Despite their rarity, sawfish fins are still a highly-prized ingredient of shark fin soup and their rostra or 'saw' is a valuable and traded curio. Their livers were traditionally valued for the high vitamin A content; their meat is still consumed today. Sawfish are also an increasingly popular attraction in public aquariums.



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A Global Strategy for Sawfish Conservation

In response to the dramatic depletion of all species of sawfishes, the IUCN Shark Specialist Group has recently developed a Global Sawfish Conservation Strategy. As part of this initiative, 29 shark and sawfish experts from 11 countries gathered in May 2012 to develop a set of global-scale priorities for research, education, and conservation action, aimed at restoring robust sawfish populations.

The IUCN Shark Specialist Group

The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Species Survival Commission's Shark Specialist Group is a global network of 170 volunteer experts in the fields of shark biology, conservation, and fisheries, drawn from 55 countries. They are united by their mission to secure the conservation, management, and recovery of the world's sharks, skates, rays and chimaeras, through the mobilisation of global technical and scientific expertise.

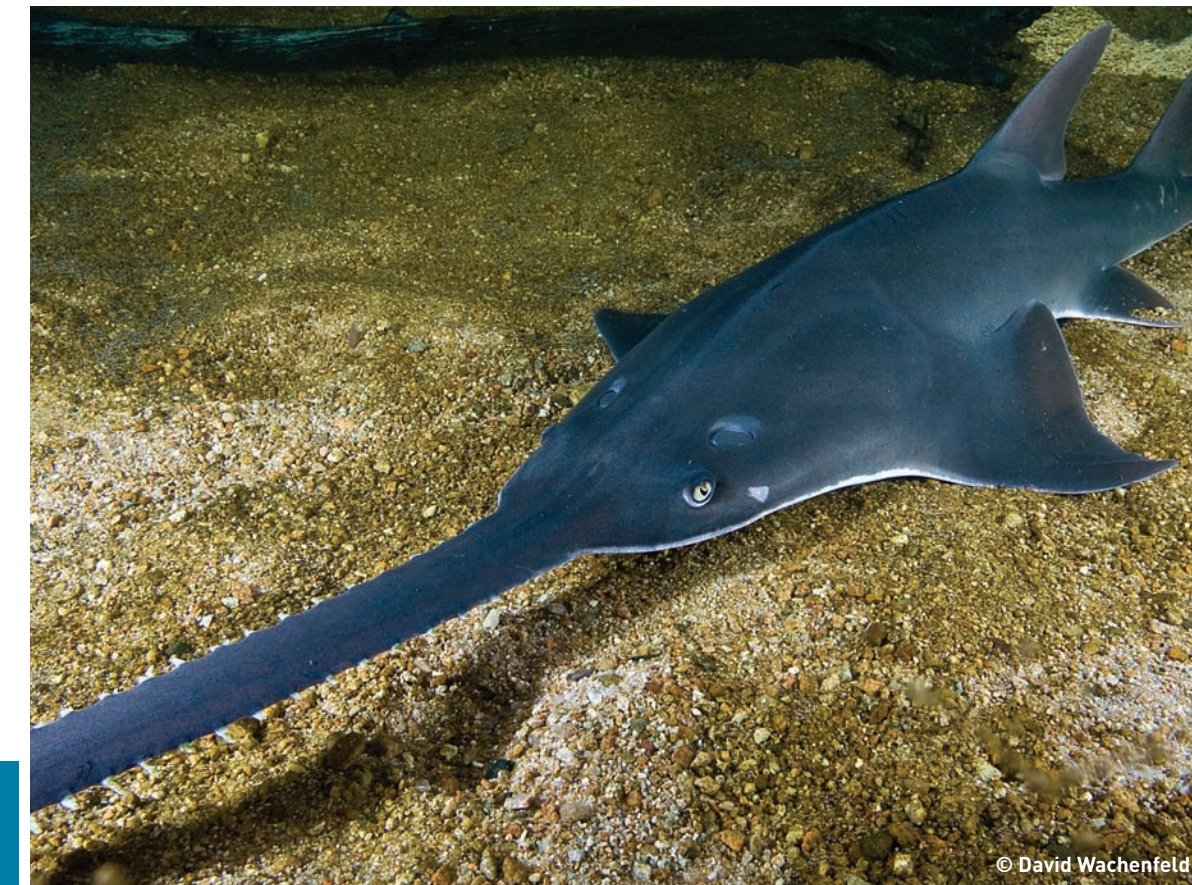


Further Information

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SECURING A SAFE FUTURE FOR SAWFISHES: Conservation and Management Recommendations



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Sawfishes

Shark-like rays of shallow coastal waters

The seven sawfish species live in shallow coastal waters, less than 100 meters deep. They tolerate a wide range of salinities, and some species (such as the largetooth sawfish, *Pristis pristis*) penetrate far into major rivers and inhabit lakes of South America, Africa, and Southeast Asia. Juveniles inhabit estuaries, whereas adults inhabit coastal bays, estuaries, and mangrove coastlines.

Sawfishes are large-bodied rays and some species reach 7 metres in length. Sawfishes give birth to few live young after a gestation of 4-6 months, which are vulnerable to capture because of their large size at birth (40 to 90 cm long).

Formerly widespread and abundant

Sawfishes were once common throughout the tropical and subtropical waters of the Atlantic, Indian, and Pacific Oceans. Over the past half-century, the populations of all seven species have declined dramatically and are now categorized as Critically Endangered by the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species™. Sawfish can be reliably found in only two remaining strongholds where they are strictly protected: Florida (USA) and northern Australia.



Threats

Easily entangled, overfished, and habitat dependent

Their distinctive toothed rostra help sawfish feed, and yet have been central to their downfall. Sawfish rostra are easily entangled in all kinds of fishing nets.

Historically, fishermen targeted sawfishes mainly for their meat, with worldwide landings peaking in 1978. Today, incidental capture, particularly in trawls and gillnets, is the primary threat to sawfishes. Captured sawfish are often retained because of their valuable fins and rostra.

Sawfish need ample, healthy coastal, estuarine, and freshwater habitats, particularly mangroves, which are disappearing rapidly - 20% have been deforested since 1980.

“There aren’t any [sawfish]. It’s been over 10 years since anyone’s caught this fish. There are even those who don’t recognize it, and children born here 25 years ago... say “What is it?” – Old fisherman, West Africa

Sawfish distribution map: Common and formerly common populations



Current sawfish protection

International trade is prohibited under Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), with the exception of live specimens of freshwater sawfish (*Pristis microdon*), which can be traded to aquariums under certain circumstances though inclusion in CITES Appendix II.

Sawfishes are protected to varying degrees in Australia, Bahrain, Brazil, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mauritania, Mexico, Nicaragua, Qatar, Senegal, United Arab Emirates, and the USA, through prohibitions on take and protected areas.

Call to Action

Minimise threats through greater understanding, protection, and regional collaboration

The Shark Specialist Group has developed a number of priority activities and policy recommendations to enhance the protection and recovery of sawfishes, and is working to:

- Create sawfish identification manuals (for whole animals and parts) to aid fishermen, customs agents, and enforcement personnel
- Train local fisheries personnel to carry out sawfish surveys in key regions, including West Africa, Borneo, Brazil, India, and Papua New Guinea
- Promote strict national protections in sawfish range States where none yet apply
- Encourage greater awareness, coverage, and enforcement of existing sawfish safeguards
- Inform the development of accompanying national and regional sawfish recovery plans
- Address the impacts of trawl and gillnet fisheries, particularly in southeast Asia and other bycatch hotspots around the world
- Expand and activate the IUCN global sawfish network to foster regional champions of sawfish conservation.

Sawfishes are the most seriously threatened species group covered by the International Plan of Action for “Sharks”. These Shark Plans should, *inter alia*, ensure that catches are sustainable, assess threats to populations, determine and protect critical habitats, and provide special attention to vulnerable or threatened shark populations. Attention from FAO Members is urgently needed to prevent sawfish extinction.