

Media Release

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Department of
Fisheries

World recognition for WA shark recovery

If you like your fish and chips you may care to spare a thought for the whiskery shark (*Furgaleus macki*), one of WA's conservation success stories.

This once threatened fish-shop staple – think gummy shark or flake – is slowly recovering from over-fishing and has been given “Least Concern” status on the World Conservation Union (IUCN) Red List of threatened species.

Department of Fisheries research scientist Rory McAuley said the classification was good news, but there was still a way to go for the species to build to sustainable numbers.

“It’s a pretty interesting assessment in that the Least Concern classification is usually reserved for species that have never been commercially fished, whereas in the 1970s and 1980s whiskery sharks were fished down to a pretty low level,” Mr McAuley said.

The classification recognises the success of careful management of this fishery, which has included a series of fishing gear restrictions, beginning in the late-1980s, and regular scientific assessments of the stock.

“Whiskery sharks were over-fished by the temperate WA demersal gillnet fishery largely before that fishery came under a formal management plan.”

Longline fishing of the whiskery shark began in the 1940s but it wasn’t until gillnetting in the 1960s when dedicated, well-equipped shark fishing vessels entered the fishery that catches rose dramatically. By the mid-1990s the whiskery shark population off WA’s coast had been reduced to less than 40 per cent of original levels.

“Our latest stock assessment advice is that management actions during the 1990s have successfully halted the depletion of that species and the stock is now stable, though it is below the target level of 40 per cent of stock size prior to fishing,” Mr McAuley said. “It is beginning to recover but very slowly.

“We have proposed further management actions in the temperate demersal gillnet fishery to see that the recovery continues and as quickly as possible. This includes closing areas of the fishery during the ‘pupping’ season to protect females about to give birth.

“There are also proposals for additional management controls to deal with the take of highly-vulnerable larger sharks such as dusky and sandbar sharks.

(more) ...

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“Whiskery shark is an example of how you can effectively manage threatened shark stocks and ensure the long-term economic viability of this \$5 million a year fishery.”

Whiskery sharks are named for the two nasal “barbels” - fleshy appendages – that hang down in front of their mouths.

“As far as sharks go, it’s small and feeds mainly on invertebrates such as octopus and small fish and certainly is no threat to humans. They have small mouths and would not be inclined to even bite your big toe,” he said.

“They taste pretty good, too.”

BACKGROUND

- The whiskery shark *Furgaleus macki* is restricted to the continental shelf waters of southern and western Australia. It is most commonly found in rocky reef seagrass areas from North West Cape in WA, south and east to, at least, eastern South Australia. It occurs in greatest numbers in south-western Australia from Albany to Kalbarri.
- Whiskery sharks can grow to 160cm. Mature females produce an average of 19 pups of about 25cm in length every second year.
- The temperate demersal gillnet fishery is worth \$5 million a year to WA.
- Management of the fishery in WA began in the mid-1980s.
- The species was included in the 2004 IUCN Red List of Threatened Species as of Least Concern status.

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