



Ministerial Statement

By

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Deputy Premier and Minister of Home Affairs

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Protection of Sharks and the Giant Manta Ray

Mr. Speaker, I rise today to update this Honourable House on the Government's strategy to improve the protection of sharks.

Mr. Speaker, Let me first address the burning question that I am sure is on many people's minds, which is why? Why should we protect sharks? Well, sharks are apex predators meaning they are on top of the marine food chain. They are essential to maintaining healthy marine ecosystems. Case in point, as a result of the decline in shark numbers in the Atlantic Ocean around Bermuda, there is little control on the population of green turtles and their feeding behaviour on the Bermuda Platform. Green turtles have overgrazed Bermuda's seagrass beds

causing this important habitat to collapse. The disappearance of our seagrass habitat will not only impact our fisheries, as many of our commercial fish species begin their lives in seagrass beds, but it could also impact the quality of the surrounding water and reduce our resilience to climate change effects.

Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members may be aware that sharks have been heavily fished all over the world and because of this many shark species are threatened and, on the decline, globally. A number of sharks are endangered to the point of being on the verge of extinction for several reasons including:

- **Slow Reproductive Rate** - It takes sharks a long time to reach sexual maturity and reproduce, and the typical female shark produces few offspring per mating cycle. As a result, once a population is threatened, it can take a long time to recover.
- **Targeted Fisheries** — some species of sharks are targeted by commercial and recreational fisheries, which can result in overfishing. Many shark species have been harvested commercially for their meat, liver, and cartilage, as well as their fins. Local shark fishing is largely restricted to sharks used in traditional “shark hash” - dusky and gummy sharks, and for Lobster Bait.

- **Shark Finning**—While the shark meat isn't always considered valuable, many species are prized for their fins, which are used to make shark fin soup and traditional medicines. Finning is a cruel practice in which a shark's fins are lopped off and the live shark is then tossed back into the sea to die. Shark finning is currently illegal in Bermuda under the Fisheries Regulations 2010.
- **By- Catch** Sharks are often unintentionally caught in the nets of commercial fishermen along with the fish they meant to catch. Sharks require forward momentum to breathe. When trapped in a net, they often die. Bermuda does not allow the use of these type of nets; however, there is some limited by-catch on methods allowed such as hook and line.

Mr. Speaker, In February 2020, at the Thirteenth Session of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS), a decision was taken to include the Oceanic Whitetip Shark on Appendix I of the Convention. CMS. This Appendix covers endangered migratory species. The Giant Manta Ray was also added to Appendix I of the CMS in 2011.

Appendix II of the CMS, which covers migratory species that have an unfavourable conservation status, includes a number of other sharks that are found in Bermuda waters, namely Bigeye Thresher, Porbeagle, Silky, Shortfin Mako and Hammerhead sharks.

Restrictions on fishing for all these shark species have also been put in place by the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT). Bermuda is party to these conventions and is thus required to implement the increased shark protections.

Mr Speaker, At least twenty species of sharks have been found in local waters. A number of these species have only been observed occasionally, and the majority are considered by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) to be endangered, vulnerable to extinction or close to being threatened with extinction.

Due to research conducted in Bermuda, we know the most about Galapagos sharks, known locally as duskies, and tiger sharks. Some of our tiger sharks travel to the Bahamas in the winter before returning here again when the water warms up.

Nurse sharks are found inshore and are one of the most docile sharks around. Unfortunately, they are very rare these days. We also occasionally see bigeye thresher sharks and great and scalloped hammerheads close to shore. Lemon shark and reef shark have also been found in shallow water.

In the deep water, particularly around the Bermuda Platform, we find the six-gill shark as deep as six thousand (6000) feet and up to sixteen (16) feet in length, as well as the gummy shark, also known as the smooth dogfish. The gummy shark is not purely a deep-water shark though as it

is often found right off the rocks too. These sharks have flat teeth, much like our molars, designed for crushing their normal prey: crustaceans like lobsters, crabs, and mollusks. Gulper shark, spiny dogfish, and small-tooth sand tiger shark have also been caught in deep water.

Offshore, in the oceanic waters, we find shortfin makos, blue sharks, silky and oceanic whitetips as well as the whale shark, which is the largest fish in the ocean, maxing out around sixty feet long. Surprisingly, this giant primarily eats microscopic plankton. The Whale Shark is currently protected as a Level 1 species under the Protected Species Act 2003. A sand tiger shark was also found on Argus Bank. Last but not least, the Great White shark has been seen occasionally well offshore in winter and early spring as it prefers deep, cool water.

Mr. Speaker, Sharks in Bermuda have not been targeted on an industrial level by local commercial fisherman. We do have a relatively small-scale traditional shark fishery providing “shark hash”. Current legislation already affords these sharks some level of protection, such as a prohibition on finning of sharks at sea, the requirement for a license to use fixed shark fishing lines and lines with more than five (5) hooks. That said Bermuda can and needs to do more to protect these important species.

Mr. Speaker, Going forward all sharks, except for the Galapagos, gummy and six-gill sharks will be protected under the new legislation.

These exemptions were given for cultural reasons and to allow for existing commercial fishing interests to continue at a well-managed level. It should be noted that the Galapagos shark is listed as being of ‘Least Concern’ by the IUCN, and smooth dogfish and six-gill shark are listed as ‘Near Threatened’. Species are considered threatened and in need of the strictest protections when IUCN lists them as critically endangered, endangered, or vulnerable.

Mr. Speaker, Recreational fishermen will not be permitted to take sharks and commercial fishermen will be required to obtain a special licence to take the permitted sharks. These licences will have terms and conditions attached, such as catch limits.

Mr. Speaker, in regards to the Giant Manta Ray, I can confirm that in Bermuda there is no fishing for this gentle and beautiful giant of the deep sea. Further we should make sure there is not any in the future and so ensure its protection, while in our waters, as a protected species under the Protected Species Act 2003.

Mr. Speaker, In closing, the protections outlined in the Fisheries (Protected Species) Amendment Order 2022, the Fisheries Amendment Regulations 2022 and the Protected Species Notice of Intention 2022 show Bermuda’s commitment to the global effort to protect important vulnerable migratory species and will also facilitate better monitoring

and management of species that are actively fished and live closer to shore.

In regards to the mandatory consultation period for the proposed addition of the Giant Manta Ray to the Protected Species Act, the public has until the 10th of April 2022 to provide comments to the Director of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources on the Protected Species Notice of Intention

Thank you, **Mr. Speaker.**