

Shark poachers prowl Egyptian waters

Author: Cam McGrath

Hurghada--Yemeni shark poachers are operating in Egyptian waters and have been involved in at least one confrontation with the Egyptian navy, environment ministry officials say.

“Over the past few weeks Yemeni shark fishing boats and their fishing gear have been sighted in the Red Sea,” says Wahid Salama, General Director of Red Sea Protectorates. “They have entered our waters illegally.”

Shark fishing is prohibited in Egypt’s Red Sea territorial waters under national legislation passed in 2005 that aims at ending the cruel and wasteful practice of “finning,” where fishermen slice off the shark’s fins and throw the animal back into the sea to die. While shark meat is of low value, the fins are prized in Asian markets, where they are made into shark fin soup. The traditional delicacy fetches over US\$100 a bowl in Hong Kong.

Marine conservation groups estimate that up to 100 million sharks are killed worldwide each year for their fins. Illegal finning has devastated shark populations and brought many of the world’s 350 shark species to the brink of extinction.

Baited long-lines used by shark fishermen have been spotted periodically in the Red Sea since 2001, but the recent capture of a Yemeni shark fishing boat is the first concrete evidence of foreign poachers operating in Egyptian waters.

According to Salama, the Egyptian navy seized the Yemeni vessel last month after two dive safari boats spotted it near Zabargad Island, a marine protectorate 230km southeast of Marsa Alam known for its hammerhead and reef shark populations. The dive boats pursued the poachers until authorities could arrive.

“The captured Yemeni boat was loaded with 71 sharks of five different species--whole sharks, some of them very big,” says Salama. “A committee estimated the value of the illegal 20-ton catch at US\$370 million.”

Navy vessels escorted the poachers’ vessel to Bernike port, where it has been impounded pending a court decision on the fate of the boat and its crew. The shark carcasses were buried in a sandy pit near Wadi Gamal.

The captured Yemeni boat appears to have been the “mothership” for several smaller fishing vessels. While Salama confirmed the seizure of only one boat, as many as six boats may have been involved.

A statement by the Hurghada Environmental Protection and Conservation Association (HEPCA), a local environmental NGO, said four shark finning boats were seized in various locations and more than 60 Yemeni fishermen were taken into custody. Unconfirmed reports indicate that an additional two boats were pursued and presumed captured by the Egyptian navy.

“This Yemeni incident has made it very obvious that the shark [protection] legislation we passed five years ago has made us a very nice target for shark fishermen in the region,” says Amr Ali, HEPCA’s managing director. “They know now that if they go to the Egyptian Red Sea where sharks are protected and the population is increasing they’ll get a good opportunity to catch them.”

Dive safari boats operating in Egypt’s southern Red Sea waters have reported finding the buoys and long-lines used by shark finners. Some liveaboard captains claim to have seen motorized skiffs carrying poachers armed with automatic weapons.

On 9 June, a liveaboard returning from a two-week dive trip to Sudan spotted a suspicious buoy with a beacon shortly after crossing into Egyptian territorial waters.

“We’ve made more than 40 trips to Sudan and never seen this beacon, and had come this way just 10 days earlier,” recalls Yasser El Moafi, owner of the Royal Evolution.

When the crew stopped to investigate, they discovered two long-lines attached to the buoy--one over six kilometers long. The lines were fixed with hundreds of hooks baited with baby dolphin fins and shark meat.

El Moafi says his crew and foreign tourists on board worked through the night to free dozens of live tiger sharks, makos and hammerheads that had been caught on the hooks.

“We saw an approaching fishing boat on the radar and we were worried because we knew these fishermen might be armed and they could attack our boat,” he says. “Fortunately, as soon as the fishermen saw our searchlight they sped away.”

Protecting sharks has always been a challenge. Hollywood has portrayed sharks as ruthless killers, but only a few species can be considered dangerous and attacks on humans are extremely rare.

“Movies like Jaws give the impression that it’s good to kill sharks,” says El Moafi. “It’s made it hard to convince people we should protect them.”

According to HEPCA, sharks are apex predators that play a key role in regulating marine populations. Their conservation also makes economic sense: Many tourists pay top dollar to visit Egypt’s Red Sea dive destinations primarily for the opportunity to see their large shark populations. It is estimated that each live shark generates over LE1.25 million a year in tourist revenues.

“HEPCA dropped the tree hugging approach years ago,” says Ali. “In Egypt [conservation] has to be linked to the economy and job creation. When we explain that for every shark you kill to get LE200 of fins the country is losing LE1.25 million per year... well, people listen.”

External links

[Hurghada Environmental Protection and Conservation Association](#)

Publishing Date:

Mon, 12/07/2010 - 17:24

Source URL (retrieved on 04/05/2011 - 15:56): <http://www.almasyalyoum.com/node/55797>