



These sharks were confiscated from the small poaching vessel in the background. The vessel was later destroyed.

Shark poaching in the British Indian Ocean Territory

Sharks, being at the top of the food chain, are very important for the marine biodiversity of British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT) waters. The UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation data shows that in the Indian Ocean generally, shark numbers are down by about 90% over the last 30 years because of overfishing, and diver observation data in Chagos waters ¹ suggests a similar decline has taken place here.

To the credit of the BIOT Administration, rigorous management measures exist to protect sharks; no targeted shark fishing is permitted, but unfortunately they are caught as by-catch by licensed fishers of other species. If this happens, finning is expressly banned and the sharks must be landed whole or released.

However, small fishing boats mainly based in Sri Lanka, continue to come to Chagos waters risking a £100,000 fine and the confiscation of boat and equipment. Shark fins are also an important part of the "pay" of otherwise poorly paid crews of tuna fishing vessels and this tempts some to set the lines to "accidentally" catch sharks. The fins are removed and the bodies are dumped. Dried shark fins are a high value commodity, sold on to traders and used to make shark fin soup in Japan and China.

The BIOT's patrol vessel *Pacific Marlin*, managed by Marine Resources Assessment Group Ltd, catches poachers, but with over half a million square kilometres to cover it has a difficult task. However, some dramatic arrests are made as can be seen from the disheartening photograph, but too late for these unfortunate sharks. In this case the boat was destroyed.

¹ Anderson RC, Sheppard CRC, Spalding MD, Crosby R 1998. Shortage of Sharks at Chagos. Shark News, newsletter of the IUCN Shark Specialist Group 10:1-3.

Any observant sailor is encouraged to report suspicious vessels to the *Pacific Marlin* using the email address: BIOTAdmin@fco.gov.uk.

The Chagos Conservation Trust is a charity (Registered in the UK No. 1031561), whose aims are to promote conservation, scientific and historical research, and to advance education concerning the archipelago. The Trust is a non political association.

If you would like more information on the publications or membership, please contact the Secretary (simonhughes@hughes-mccormack.co.uk), or visit www.chagos-trust.org