



The fin trade

Shark fins are dried and used to make shark fin soup, an expensive dish served at weddings and banquets in parts of Asia.

For years, many fishing boats cut the fins off sharks and threw the rest of the shark back into the sea, often still alive. This is called finning. Fins are worth far more than shark meat, so finning let boats fill up with fins instead of whole sharks.

Today, nearly 70% of countries and territories have rules against finning, and most sharks are now brought to port whole. That sounds like good news. But a big study in 2024 found that the total number of sharks killed did not go down. Between 2012 and 2019 it rose from about 76 million to about 80 million a year, because sharks are still caught for both their meat and their fins.

In 2022, the world's governments agreed to control the international trade in all 54 requiem sharks and more hammerhead sharks under CITES, the treaty on the wildlife trade. That means most of the fin trade now needs permits showing it is legal and sustainable.

Key facts

- Nearly 70% of countries and territories have rules against finning.
- Sharks killed in fisheries rose from about 76 to 80 million a year between 2012 and 2019.
- About 25 million of them belonged to threatened species.
- In 2022, CITES listed all 54 requiem sharks and more hammerheads.

Talk about it in your group

1. Why didn't banning finning save more sharks?
2. What else could stop sharks being overfished?
3. If shark fin soup were served at a family celebration, what could you do?

Sources: Worm and others, Science, 2024. IFAW, 2022. Full links are in the teacher reading. Free to use and share for education. Made by Marine Conservation Philippines. More free lessons: marineconservationphilippines.org/resources/teachers-resources/



B Caught by accident

Many sharks and rays are not caught on purpose. They get hooked on longlines or tangled in nets meant for other fish. This is called bycatch.



Photo: MCP

Most sharks now die in coastal fisheries close to land, not out on the high seas. Coastal fishing accounts for about 95% of all the sharks killed.

A world survey of 371 coral reefs found that fishing with longlines and gillnets was one of the biggest reasons reef sharks had disappeared. Lost or dumped nets, called ghost nets, can keep catching animals for years.

In the Philippines, the law says any whale shark or manta ray caught by accident must be released unharmed straight away. The survey also found that places with more sharks were usually well governed, and either banned shark fishing or had strong, science-based limits on how many could be caught.

Key facts

- About 95% of sharks killed by fishing die in coastal fisheries.
- Longlines and gillnets are a major cause of reef shark loss.
- Philippine law says whale sharks and mantas caught by accident must be released unharmed.

Talk about it in your group

- 1. How could fishers catch fish without catching sharks?**
- 2. Who should pay for safer fishing gear?**
- 3. What can divers and snorkellers do about ghost nets?**

Sources: Worm and others, Science, 2024. Global FinPrint, 2020. BFAR Fisheries Administrative Order 193, 1998. Full links are in the teacher reading. Free to use and share for education. Made by Marine Conservation Philippines. More free lessons: marineconservationphilippines.org/resources/teachers-resources/



C Manta rays and gill plates

Manta rays are gentle filter feeders that glide through the water eating plankton. Some people hunt them for their gill plates.



Photo: MCP

Gill plates are the feathery filters that mantas use to sieve plankton from the water. Dried gill plates are sold in some Asian markets as a medicine, but there is no scientific evidence that they work, and some have been found to contain harmful levels of metals such as arsenic and lead.

Mantas grow slowly, and a female usually has just one pup every two to three years, so they cannot replace the ones that are caught. The reef manta ray is listed as Vulnerable and the giant manta ray as Endangered.

The Philippines banned catching, selling and exporting manta rays in 1998, and the international trade in mantas has been controlled under CITES since 2013. In 2025, MCP volunteers recorded at least three manta rays on local reefs, and one seemed to stay for a whole week.

Key facts

- A female manta usually has one pup every two to three years.
- Reef manta: Vulnerable. Giant manta: Endangered.
- There is no scientific evidence that gill plates work as medicine.
- Mantas have been protected in the Philippines since 1998.

Talk about it in your group

- 1. Why does it matter that mantas only have one pup every few years?**
- 2. How would you convince someone not to buy gill plates?**
- 3. Why might a living manta be worth more to a town than a dead one?**

Sources: Pew Charitable Trusts, 2013. James Cook University research on mobulid gill plates. IUCN Red List. MCP, 2026. Full links are in the teacher reading. Free to use and share for education. Made by Marine Conservation Philippines. More free lessons: marineconservationphilippines.org/resources/teachers-resources/



D Oslob: feeding whale sharks

In Oslob, in southern Cebu, whale sharks are fed by hand from boats every day so that tourists can swim with them.



Photo: MCP

Feeding began in 2011. Now more than 500,000 tourists visit each year, which makes Oslob the biggest whale shark tourism site in the world. The tourism gives local fishers an income, and they help pay for sea wardens and police who protect whale sharks and marine reserves.

Scientists have also found problems. Some whale sharks now stay at Oslob all year instead of travelling to find food, as whale sharks normally do. Fed sharks were less likely to swim away from people, and in 93% of the scientists' observations, people were closer than 2 metres to a shark, even though the code of conduct asks visitors to keep their distance.

Whale sharks at Oslob also have more scars and injuries than whale sharks at places where they are not fed. People who support the feeding say it has stopped whale shark hunting there and changed how the town sees sharks.

Key facts

- More than 500,000 tourists a year.
- Some fed sharks became year-round residents.
- People were within 2 metres of a shark in 93% of observations.
- Fed whale sharks have more injuries.

Talk about it in your group

- 1. Who benefits from feeding whale sharks, and who might be harmed?**
- 2. If you were the mayor of Oslob, what would you change?**
- 3. Would you swim with fed whale sharks? Why or why not?**

Sources: Legaspi and others, 2020. LAMAVE research, 2017 and later. Lowe and Tejada, 2019. Full links are in the teacher reading. Free to use and share for education. Made by Marine Conservation Philippines. More free lessons: marineconservationphilippines.org/resources/teachers-resources/



E Donsol: watching without feeding

In Donsol, Sorsogon, whale sharks gather to feed on plankton in the wild, and visitors go out with trained local guides to see them.



Photo: Matthew T Rader, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons

In 1998, dozens of whale sharks were discovered off Donsol. Before that, whale sharks in parts of the Philippines were hunted for their meat and fins, which fetched high prices overseas. That same year, the government banned catching, selling and exporting whale sharks and manta rays, and the town declared its waters a sanctuary for them.

Local fishers trained as Butanding Interaction Officers. They guide visitors and make sure everyone follows the rules. The sharks are never fed, so tours only run in the season when the sharks come on their own, and there is no guarantee of seeing one.

Donsol's program has been called the Philippines' most successful ecotourism product, and in 2004 TIME magazine named it the best place for an animal encounter in Asia.

Key facts

- Whale sharks and mantas have been protected in the Philippines since 1998.
- Donsol declared its waters a whale shark sanctuary in 1998.
- Local guides, the Butanding Interaction Officers, run the tours.
- The sharks are never fed.

Talk about it in your group

- 1. Compare Donsol and Oslob. Which is better for the sharks? Which is better for the town?**
- 2. Why might some tourists prefer a place where they are sure to see a shark?**
- 3. What rules would you give visitors?**

Sources: Vera Files. BFAR Fisheries Administrative Order 193, 1998. House of Representatives bill on Donsol, 2025. Full links are in the teacher reading. Free to use and share for education. Made by Marine Conservation Philippines. More free lessons: marineconservationphilippines.org/resources/teachers-resources/



Monad Shoal: a sanctuary for thresher sharks

Off Malapascua Island in northern Cebu, thresher sharks rise from deep water early in the morning to visit cleaning stations on an underwater plateau called Monad Shoal.

Thresher sharks have a tail that can be as long as their body, which they whip to stun small fish. At Monad Shoal, small cleaner fish pick parasites off their skin. It is one of the only places in the world where divers can see thresher sharks almost every day.

Divers come from all over the world to see them. Researchers estimate that scuba diving fuels about 80% of the local economy in Daanbantayan, the town Malapascua belongs to.

In 2015, the mayor declared Monad Shoal and nearby Gato Island a shark and ray sanctuary, where catching or trading any shark or ray is banned. Local wardens called Migo sa Iho, which means Friends of the Sharks, help enforce the rules. The pelagic thresher shark is listed as Endangered.

Key facts

- Divers can see thresher sharks here almost every day.
- Scuba diving fuels about 80% of the town's economy.
- Shark and ray sanctuary since 2015.
- Pelagic thresher shark: Endangered.

Talk about it in your group

1. Why would a town protect sharks instead of fishing them?
2. What could happen to Malapascua if the threshers disappeared?
3. Could a sanctuary work near your school? What would it need?

Sources: Greenpeace Philippines, 2015. Thresher Shark Research and Conservation Project. IUCN Red List. Full links are in the teacher reading. Free to use and share for education. Made by Marine Conservation Philippines. More free lessons: marineconservationphilippines.org/resources/teachers-resources/