



Smalltooth Sawfish

Population Down as Much as 99 Percent



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Smalltooth sawfish.

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Smalltooth sawfish

Scientific name: *Pristis pectinata*

Smalltooth sawfish in the US once ranged in shallow waters from the Gulf of Mexico to North Carolina, and seasonally as far north as New York. Today, this species is found regularly only in a few protected areas of the Florida Keys and Everglades. Scientists have concluded that this sawfish population has declined by as much as 99 percent and is in danger of extinction.

Sawfish, among the most endangered fish in the world, are highly modified rays that evolved from ancient sharks over many millions of years. Six species including the smalltooth are recognized around the world; individuals range in size from two to 20 feet and can weigh more than 1,000 pounds. They are easily recognized by the tooth-studded, blade-like snout ("saw") that scientists believe they use to find and disable prey. Like most sharks, sawfish grow slowly, mature late, and bear few young. This makes them exceptionally vulnerable to a variety of threats, particularly overfishing. All species are classified by the IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature) as critically endangered.

The toothy snouts of sawfish snag easily in fishing nets and lines. Sawfish caught unintentionally in fisheries (known as "bycatch") is the main cause of population declines. Sawfish "saws" are sold as curios around the world; their fins are prized for shark fin soup. Degradation of nearshore areas, particularly mangrove habitat, also poses a threat to sawfish recovery.

The US National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) listed US smalltooth sawfish as “endangered” under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) in 2003. The smalltooth sawfish is currently the only US marine fish listed under the ESA. A NMFS Recovery Plan for the species was finalized in January 2009.

The Smalltooth Sawfish Recovery Plan identifies a variety of actions, from research to fishing restrictions, needed to recover US sawfish over 100 years. In particular, the plan highlights the importance of reducing smalltooth sawfish bycatch in a number of fisheries. As part of the ESA process, NMFS is designating “critical habitat”, nearshore areas including red mangrove stands that are essential to juvenile sawfish. Development or dredging projects proposed in these areas will receive special federal scrutiny to ensure minimal impact on sawfish recovery. You can find a link to the Sawfish Recovery Plan and a wealth of related information at <http://www.flmnh.ufl.edu/fish/sharks/sawfish/>.

In order limit the threat to sawfish from trade, the US, with the support of conservation groups, has fought to list sawfish under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). The US first proposed listing sawfish under CITES in 1997;

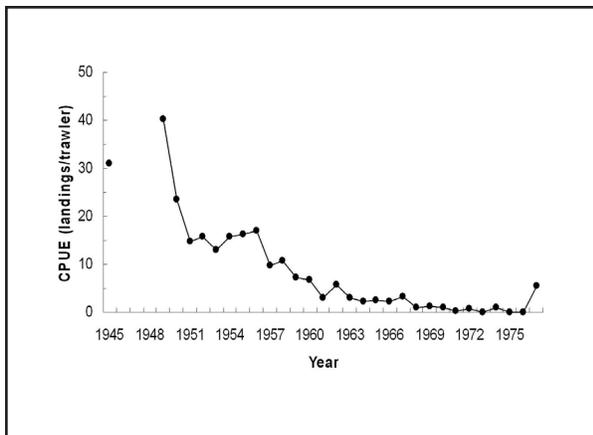
their efforts finally paid off in 2007 with a ban on international trade in all but one species of sawfish.

What Ocean Conservancy is doing to help

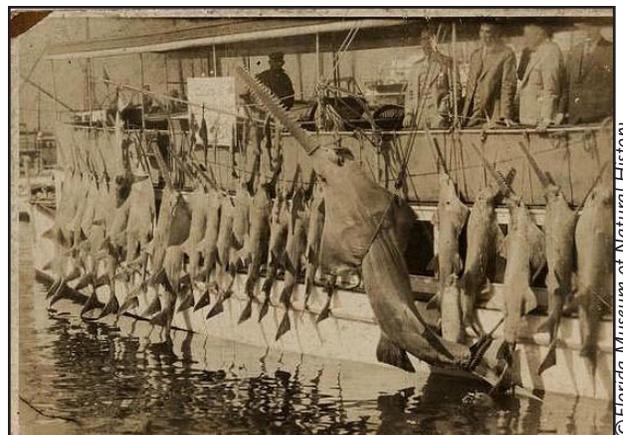
For more than a decade, Ocean Conservancy has been the lead advocacy organization publicizing the plight of sawfish and building the public, scientific, and political support necessary to bring them back from the brink of extinction. In 1999, Ocean Conservancy filed the petition that led to the smalltooth sawfish listing under the ESA. Ocean Conservancy staff served on the team that drafted the Smalltooth Sawfish Recovery Plan and was a major proponent for the listing of sawfish under CITES.

What you can do to help

Increased public awareness of the plight of the sawfish is essential for their survival. You can help by contacting Congress and voicing your support for prompt implementation of the Smalltooth Sawfish Recovery Plan and stronger CITES action for all sawfish species. If you see a sawfish, report it to the Sawfish Encounter Database by visiting www.flmnh.ufl.edu/fish/sharks/sawfish/sawfishencounters.html or calling (352) 392-2360.



Mean annual landing of sawfish per trawler in Louisiana waters. From *Simpfendorfer (2002)*.



Historical photo of sawfish.