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Sharks! Apex Predators Program Celebrates Five Decades of Shark Research

Some things never change, like public fascination with sharks.

Considered apex predators with few natural predators themselves, sharks prey on many species lower on the food chain, and are often less abundant than their prey. Sharks grow slowly, live long lives, and have few offspring, making them the object of both fascination and fear.

They are also exploited in many parts of the world, making understanding their life histories and role in the food chain all the more important. Many shark species are in trouble due to shark finning, bycatch, and other practices.

While little is known about the biology and life histories of some species, coastal surveys and cooperative tagging programs begun decades ago by federal fisheries scientists have contributed significantly to current knowledge of many shark species.

The NEFSC's Narragansett Laboratory in Narragansett, Rhode Island, is home to the Apex Predators Program (APP). Shark jaws, vertebra and other samples provide visual evidence of the program's activities and help educate visitors, from school children to researchers to the general public, about sharks and their role in the ecosystem.

Apex Predators Program scientists conduct life history studies of commercially and recreationally important shark species, participate in and conduct a variety of research cruises, and often go aboard commercial vessels to obtain biological samples and to tag sharks. Data from coastal shark surveys, shark tagging programs, pupping and nursery area surveys, and other research activities are collected year-round.

NEFSC researchers have been attending recreational shark tournaments in the Northeast U.S. since 1961, monitoring the size, sex, and species composition in the recreational catch while collecting biological samples. In 2012, biological samples for life history studies, catch and other population data for more than 150 pelagic sharks were collected at nine recreational fishing tournaments in the northeastern United States. In July 2013, APP researchers collected data and samples at the annual shark tournament on Martha's Vineyard, and provided tags for the all-release shark tournament at Montauk, Long Island.

The Apex Predators Program also manages and coordinates the Cooperative Atlantic States Shark Pupping and Nursery (COASTSPAN) program, collaborating with researchers in

coastal states from Rhode Island to Florida to conduct a comprehensive and standardized investigation of shark nursery areas. Program staff also work with thousands of volunteers on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean through the Cooperative Shark Tagging Program (CSTP).

The data and samples collected by these various activities are unique, making the Apex Predators Program a valuable resource for researchers around the world. Federal scientists, often in collaboration with other, international shark researchers, use these data and samples to detect trends in species and size composition, and process tissue for life history and genetic studies. They also engage in outreach opportunities with fishermen and the public.

Each year, scientific papers using the Apex Predators Program database and sample collection appear in journals. Media outlets have featured Apex Predators Program staff and their research, including the television series "Swords: Life on the Line," which first aired on the Discovery Channel in 2009. While program staff scientists generally prefer to stay out of the limelight of media and public attention, their work significantly contributes to our knowledge about the life history of sharks.

Interested in information about shark tagging, how to report a tagged shark if you catch one, or learning how to identify a shark species? Go to the Apex Predators Program web site. You can also click on the related links above or highlighted in the text to learn more about other shark research activities and information resources.

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Related links:

Apex Predators Program: <http://na.nefsc.noaa.gov/sharks/>

Cooperative Shark Tagging Program: <http://na.nefsc.noaa.gov/sharks/tagging.html>

Cooperative Atlantic States Shark Pupping and Nursery (COASTSPAN) survey:
<http://na.nefsc.noaa.gov/sharks/coastspan.html>

Coastal Shark Survey: <http://na.nefsc.noaa.gov/sharks/survey.html>

NOAA Shark Research – Atlantic Highly Migratory Species:
<http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/sfa/hms/sharks.html>