Contact: Shelley Dawicki
508-495-2378
shelley.dawicki@noaa.gov

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Coastal Shark Survey Tags 1,800 Sharks off US East Coast in 2012

While white sharks seem to attract much of the media attention, they are not the only shark species that occur in local waters. Sandbar, dusky and tiger sharks are among dozens of shark species living in the coastal waters off the U.S. East Coast.

Knowledge about these various shark species is improving. A survey begun decades ago is helping scientists and fishery resource managers to monitor shark populations and the role of sharks in marine ecosystems.

In 2012 NOAA scientists from the Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC)'s Narragansett Laboratory in Narragansett, R.I., conducted their tenth coastal shark survey from Florida to Delaware. The survey, conducted every two to three years, is the oldest continuing survey of large coastal sharks in the U.S. Atlantic Ocean.

The 100-foot charter fishing vessel *Eagle Eye II* from Fairhaven, Mass., was used for the 2012 survey, conducted April 4 to May 21 from just south of Ft. Pierce, Florida, to the North Carolina/Virginia border. Poor weather and time prevented further sampling north to Delaware. The previous survey was conducted in 2009.

Using commercial Florida-style longline fishing methods to standardize survey results, researchers captured 1,845 fish representing 16 species, of which 1,831 or 99 percent were sharks. Most sharks (1,564) were tagged and released, 128 were brought aboard for specific studies, and 139 were released untagged. Longline uses a long or main line with baited hooks spaced at regular intervals along the line.

As in previous surveys, sandbar sharks were the most numerous species caught on the survey, followed in numbers by dusky and tiger sharks. No white sharks were captured during the 2012 survey, which was conducted in the 11-20 fathom depth zone (roughly 65 to 120 feet deep). Only one white shark was captured during the 2009 survey.

Lisa Natanson, who heads the coastal shark survey program and participated in the 2012 survey, said the study's primary goal is to gather information about the distribution, abundance, and species composition of sharks. Survey objectives also include tagging sharks for migration studies and collecting catch per unit effort data

"The survey data are provided to NOAA Fisheries Service managers to monitor the health and abundance of shark populations in the Atlantic," said Nancy Kohler, who heads the Apex Predators Program at the Narragansett Laboratory, and has been on every shark survey.

NOAA Fisheries Service (officially called the National Marine Fisheries Service) manages the commercial and recreational shark fisheries in U.S. waters, including the Caribbean Sea and the Gulf of Mexico. The United States shark management began in 1993; currently 39 species are managed.

Researchers record the length, sex, and location of each animal caught before the animal is tagged and released. Sharks can range from 1 foot to 15 feet in length. Any dead sharks are carefully dissected at sea, with researchers obtaining samples for studies of age and growth, reproductive biology, and food habits. The scientists also look for parasites, and collect DNA, and blood samples. Environmental information, such as water temperature and ocean chemistry, was also obtained at each station.

The first systematic survey of Atlantic sharks, conducted by the Apex Predators Program in the summer of 1986, covered marine waters between Florida and southern New England at depths between five to 200 meters deep (about 16 to 660 feet). The current survey is conducted in the spring because coastal shark species distributions are concentrated below Delaware during this season when more northerly waters are too cold, thus making it easier to survey the whole population.

“We caught and tagged more sharks on the 2012 survey than on any previous survey,” said Natanson, who has been on all but one of the surveys. “The previous high total was in 2009, when we caught 1,676 sharks and tagged 1,352. In addition to numerous sandbar sharks, the researchers also caught more dusky, tiger, and blacktip sharks than in any prior survey. Other species included Atlantic sharpnose, scalloped hammerhead, spinner, and sand tiger sharks.

The seven-week survey was divided into two legs, each approximately 3 weeks in duration. Three scientists were on leg one and two were on leg two, and fishing was conducted around the clock. The 2012 survey was the first conducted on a chartered longline vessel, and the cooperation between captain, crew, and scientists was vital to the success of the survey. In addition to Natanson and Kohler, Matthew Pezzullo from the Narragansett Laboratory and Joseph Mello from the Center’s Woods Hole Laboratory also participated in the 2012 survey.

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Related links:

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

Atlantic Highly Migratory Species – Sharks: http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/sfa/hms/sharks.html

Frequently Asked Questions About Sharks:
http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/sfa/hms/sharks/Fact_Sheets/FAQs.htm

Most Commonly Encountered Species: http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/sharks/FSCommonencounter.htm