

A TAXONOMIC STUDY OF SHARKS (CHONDRICHTHYES : SELACHII)
ON THE WEST COAST OF SRILANKA

Priyanga Amarasekare*, Leslie Joseph**
*Dept. of Zoology, University of Colombo.
**National Aquatic Resources Agency, Colombo 15.

Sharks constitute an important food fish resource in Sri Lanka with an estimated production of 8000 to 9000 tons per annum from the coastal marine fisheries. Taxonomy of sharks however, remains a much neglected subject in Sri Lanka; the only notable contribution in the past being limited to those of Munroe (1955) and Gunawardena (1971).

In an attempt to remedy this shortcoming, a taxonomic investigation was carried out on the sharks inhabiting the seas off the west coast. This was based on catch sampling of the Fillnet and longline fisheries carried out from Pitipana, Negombo. During a preliminary study, thirteen species belonging to three orders and six families were identified, namely, Chiloscyllium indicum (Gmelin, 1789) (Orectolobiformes: Hemiscyllidae), Alopias pelagicus (Nakamura, 1935), alopias superciliosus (Lowe, 1839), Alopias vulpinus (Bonnaterre, 1788) (Lamniformes : Alopiidae), Isurus oxyrinchus (Rafinesque, 1809) (Lamniformes: Lamnidae), Hemipristis elongatus (Klunzinger, 1871) (Carcharhiniformes : Hemigaleidae), Carcharhinus falciformis (Bibron 1839) Carcharhinus longimanus (Boey, 1891) Carcharhinus sorrah (Valenciennes, 1839) Prionace glauca (Linnaeus, 1758) (Carcharhiniformes : Carcharhinidae) Eusphyrna blochii (Cavier, 1817) Sphyrna lewini (Griffith & Smith, 1834) and Sphyrna zygaena (Linnaeus, 1758) (Carcharhiniformes : Sphyrnidae).

The study also brought out several interesting findings. 82% of the sharks identified from the off-shore gillnet and longline fisheries belonged to Carcharhinidae, with Carcharhinus falciformis (73%) being the most dominant species. Three species, Alopias pelagicus, Carcharhinus longimanus and Prionace glauca were found to be hitherto unrecorded species from Sri Lanka. This appears to be the first record of A. pelagicus from the central north equatorial region of the Indian Ocean. In addition, various controversial issues regarding nomenclature were resolved. These findings are of importance in updating shark systematics with respect to Sri Lanka and in bringing to attention the prevalent problems and the requirements for future research. This study is being continued.

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