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Great hammerhead protection debated

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A proposal to protect the great hammerhead shark has sparked a debate over whether federal protection is necessary to conserve a majestic ocean predator or whether this would just impose an unnecessary burden on the fishing industry.

The great hammerhead, which can grow to 20 feet and dines on stingrays - barbs and all - can be found off the South Florida coast. Although killing them is illegal in state waters, which extend three miles off shore, they can be caught farther out.



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The National Marine Fisheries Service has made an initial finding that protecting the great hammerhead under the Endangered Species Act may be warranted, in response to petitions from WildEarth Guardians and the Natural Resources Defense Council.

Supporters say protection is necessary to prevent the species from being devastated to serve demand for shark fin soup, as well as from catch-and-release fishing and accidental catch on commercial fishing gear.

"The shark fin trade has cast a devastating toll on shark populations worldwide and threatens all species," wrote Staci-lee Sherwood, of Boca Raton. In catch and release programs, "the hammerheads suffer the most because they are highly stressed as they are pulled out of the water for picture taking and then released."

Neil Hammerschlag, research assistant professor at the University of Miami's Rosenstiel School of Marine and Atmospheric Science, said great hammerheads are declining around the world, both from the fin trade and their tendency to gather in aggregations that allow many to be caught at once.

"Great hammerheads have suffered some of the most severe reported population declines of any species of sharks," he wrote.

But states along the east coast oppose the proposal. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission said listing the species could inhibit education and research and that less drastic options exist, such as gear restrictions and time and area closures. The Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission, which represents 15 states along the Atlantic coast, said commercial fisheries worth about \$15 million would be affected by the requirement they avoid the accidental catch of great hammerheads.

"I have run shark trips – with observers aboard," wrote Jeff Oden, of North Carolina Watermen United, "and know that all shark species, including the great hammerhead, are healthy."

Although one of the largest species of shark, the great hammerhead does not rank among the sharks most likely to attack people. All species of hammerhead account for 17 known attacks worldwide, with no fatalities, according to the International Shark Attack File.

The fisheries service is now conducting a scientific review that could take up to a year. If it classifies the species as endangered, all fishing would be banned. If it's classified as threatened, the government would have more discretion on how to protect it.

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