

FROM THE DEEP BLUE TO YOUR PLATE: THE SHARKY SECRET BEHIND FISH AND CHIPS

By
Stephanie Gilmour

Bachelor of Zoology



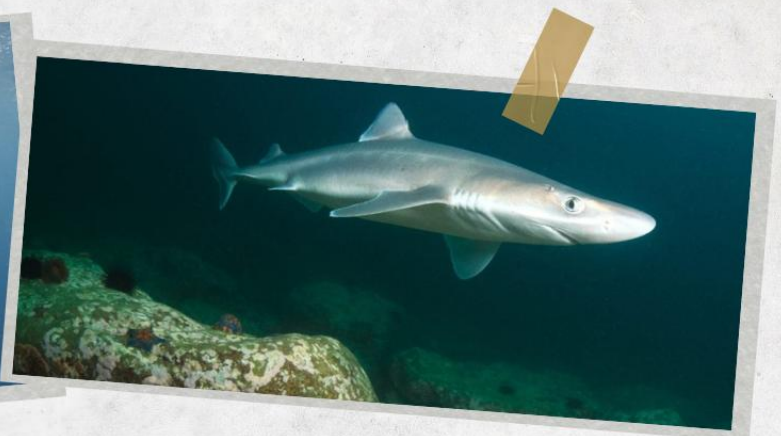
Picture this- you're sitting by the beach, the sun kissing your skin, and a plate of golden fish and chips in your lap. It's an Aussie tradition – crispy, satisfying, and oh-so-delicious. But what if I told you that beneath that crunchy batter lies a secret? A secret involving sharks and rays, those mysterious creatures of the deep blue. Buckle up – we're diving into the depths to uncover the truth.

The Hidden Cast- Australia's waters are a bustling theater, and the stars of the show are chondrichthyan fishes – sharks, rays, and chimaeras. Imagine 331 species swirling in an underwater ballet, with 183 sharks, 134 rays, and 14 chimaeras playing their roles. These creatures aren't just extras; they're essential players in the marine ecosystem. Being keystone species, they enhance the diversity and maintain ecological balance.

Now, let's talk about that flaky fish in your chips. Researchers from the University of Adelaide discovered that 8 times out of 10, 'Boneless fish' is shark and ray meat – yes, your beloved "flake" is shark! Including threatened species such as Spiny dogfish and short fin mako sharks, where 'skate' is known as ray, in fact, the IUCN red list includes 547 species of which at least 20% now are in danger of extinction.



Short fin mako shark listed as endangered by IUCN red list



Spiny dogfish shark listed as threatened by IUCN red list

But wait, there's more. Shark meat isn't just a culinary adventure; it's a health risk. Here's the lowdown:

Sharks accumulate mercury, that sneaky heavy metal, as they swim through polluted waters. Consuming shark meat exposes us to this toxic element, potentially leading to neurological woes and heart troubles. Shark meat packs a punch of urea – a natural waste product. Too much of it can wreak havoc on our kidneys, like a rebellious houseguest overstaying their welcome. It even has its own illness named after what it can do- ever heard of mad hatters' disease? Well shark meat has one of the highest concentrations of mercury in it.

Despite conservation efforts, many shark populations remain at risk due to overfishing and habitat loss. Over the last 70 years, sharks have experienced considerable declines, with some species becoming threatened and endangered. Shockingly, legal fishing kills around 100 million sharks annually, while illegal activities add another 100 million to the tally – that's a jaw-dropping 200 million sharks per year . If we continue down this path, predictions hint at a 70% reduction in shark numbers within a few decades. Imagine a world where these silent guardians vanish.

Instead of flake, consider bony fish options like snapper or flathead. They're more sustainable and won't leave you with a side of guilt.

For cosmetics, explore vegan brands that use plant-derived squalene. Your lips will thank you, and so will the sharks.

Download the "Good Fish Guide" app – it's like having a marine-savvy friend. It tells you which species are sustainable for consumption based on your region.

The Takeaway? Next time you dip your chip into that tangy sauce, remember the sharks and rays. They're more than just oceanic flavour; they're vital threads in the intricate tapestry of life beneath the waves. Let's protect them, one crispy bite at a time

Stephanie Gilmore is a Bachelor of Zoology Graduate of UNE who currently works as an Elasmobranch Conservation Coordinator in Anna Bay, NSW.

