LIVING *with* SHARKS

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Excuse us for getting ahead of ourselves, but what happens when all this hard work starts to pay off? **Paul Cox** *takes a cautious look to a future where shark populations are, hopefully, in healthier shape. What will this mean for the relationship between humans and sharks?*

There have been major steps forward in shark conservation in recent years. While we're still acutely aware of the challenges, we're starting to see years of effort come to fruition and there are potentially early signs of recovery for some populations. At the same time, we're experiencing ever-larger numbers of people living by and using the sea. More than ever, we need to consider how to manage the positive effects of healthier shark populations with the potential for "human-wildlife conflict".

The IUCN SSC Human-Wildlife Conflict Task Force describes human-wildlife conflict as "struggles that emerge when the presence or behaviour of wildlife poses actual or perceived, direct and recurring threat to human interests or needs, leading to disagreements between groups of people and negative impacts on people and/or wildlife."

A report last year on ABC News in Australia highlights some of the tensions that we might expect. We know that the primary threat to sharks and rays is overfishing. So, when fisheries are controlled, as around Australia, populations can start to rebound. That should be a good thing, but not everyone agrees.

Anglers in Australia are concerned that they face more and more cases of depredation – essentially sharks taking fish off the hook. One fishing charter operator claimed that he's experienced trips where only one in ten of the fish caught gets past the sharks. This is obviously bad for business and spoils a day out for recreational anglers. It also messes up stock management as the catches taken by sharks can't be logged.

It's possible that the reports of "out of control" depredation are caused by an excess of sharks, or a wider imbalance in the system as bait fish are removed while predators are protected. That's a challenge for fisheries managers. Keeping everything in balance, especially if a lack of data means that they find themselves working "blind".

But there could be other explanations. Research on sharks' responses to underwater sound and to their behaviour around baited traps suggests that some species quickly learn to adapt to a free meal. So, the sound of a slowing boat engine or the sniff of bait acts like a call sign. And they quickly learn where the popular fishing spots are. So maybe not more sharks, but smarter sharks.

There's also the effect of social media. Anecdotal accounts of increasing losses to sharks are amplified and this can affect people's perception of the issue. So, getting to the bottom of the problem isn't straightforward. Anglers, scientists and fisheries managers need to work together. Sightings and catches need to be recorded, populations monitored and, crucially, fisheries need to be managed for sustainability.

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It's not just anglers who might perceive issues with more sharks. There's the ever-present threat of negative interactions with water users. More sharks, and possibly different sharks, in coastal waters, will mean that we'll keep seeing sensational and disturbing headlines in the media when things go tragically wrong.

The danger, for shark conservationists, is that murmurs of disquiet turn into public concern and political pressure, ending up with shark protection measures being rolled back. This almost happened in the Maldives in 2021 when festering discontent among fishers, at an 11-year-old shark fishing ban, led the government to consider lifting it. In the end, the ban was upheld but it's a warning against complacency for conservationists.

Sharks and rays are an intrinsic element of a bigger system. Conservation is never as simple as we might hope. It's not one-dimensional, and we have to consider the views and interests of a variety of actors. As the IUCN task force notes:

"Resolving human-wildlife conflicts and fostering co-existence requires well-informed, holistic, and collaborative processes that take into account underlying social, cultural and economic contexts."

Clearly there's much to be done to understand the issues, working with communities to develop models of practice that enable us to co-exist with sharks. We owe it to everyone who's been striving hard to move the needle for shark conservation to ensure that protections stick, and that we all learn to embrace the future of living with sharks.