



# FACTSHEET

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## SHARKS OF HONG KONG

Sharks were common year-round in Hong Kong in the 1940s, but have been decimated by decades of intensive fishing. There was a targeted fishery for sharks that involved up to 50 boats which started in the 1950s, peaked in the late 1960s with around 2,400 tonnes caught annually, and had largely collapsed by the 1980s. Catches by indiscriminate fishing gear such as bottom trawls and gill nets continued, and by the early 2000s catches of sharks had declined to negligible amounts, with most species now locally extinct. No sharks are protected in Hong Kong, nor are there any limits on their catches.

17 sharks have been recorded in the published literature and from verified observations from Hong Kong with reasonable certainty since 1846. Many of these have become very rare in recent decades, and so little is known about them locally. The South China Sea contains at least 109 species, some of which probably also inhabited Hong Kong. However, distinguishing these with certainty is difficult.



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## Sharks Known from Hong Kong Waters

Family / species	Max. Length (cm)	Implicated in global shark attacks *	IUCN conservation status **	Notes
<b>Hemiscylliidae (Bamboo sharks)</b>				
Slender bambooshark ( <i>Chiloscyllium indicum</i> )	65	Harmless, no cases	Near threatened	No confirmed records in recent decades, apparently locally extinct
Whitespotted bambooshark ( <i>Chiloscyllium plagiosum</i> )	95	Harmless, no cases	Near threatened	One of only two shark species that is still reasonably abundant in Hong Kong. Bottom dwelling, feeds on small worms, invertebrates and fishes. Females lay egg cases from June-Aug, which the young emerge from after around 3 months. Distinctive spotted colouration and body shape, easily identified
<b>Carcharhinidae (Requiem sharks)</b>				
Grey reef shark ( <i>Carcharhinus amblyrhynchos</i> )	Around 240	8 unprovoked non-fatal attacks, 1 fatal	Near threatened	No confirmed records in recent decades, apparently locally extinct
Whitecheek shark ( <i>Carcharhinus dussumieri</i> )	100	Harmless, no cases	Endangered	No confirmed records in recent decades, apparently locally extinct
Silky shark ( <i>Carcharhinus falciformis</i> )	370	2 unprovoked non-fatal attacks	Vulnerable	An offshore pelagic species, Hong Kong waters are atypical habitat. No confirmed records in recent decades
Bull shark ( <i>Carcharhinus leucas</i> )	340	91 unprovoked non-fatal attacks, 25 fatal	Near threatened	Occurrence in Hong Kong reported anecdotally and in the media, including a dead juvenile in Tuen Mun in 2008. Needs to be confirmed
Blacktip shark ( <i>Carcharhinus limbatus</i> )	41	14 unprovoked non-fatal attacks	Near threatened	Several individuals were seen at the Hoi Ha Wan Marine Park in the summer of 2007, one of which was caught by a commercial fisher. 4 individuals recorded by one study in local wet markets from Apr 2007-May 2008. Occurs inshore from estuaries to rocky reefs, and mostly eats fish
Hardnose shark ( <i>Carcharhinus macloti</i> )	110	Harmless, no cases	Near threatened	No confirmed records in recent decades, apparently locally extinct
Blacktip reef shark ( <i>Carcharhinus melanopterus</i> )	<200	14 unprovoked non-fatal attacks	Near threatened	No confirmed records in recent decades, apparently locally extinct
Spot-tail shark ( <i>Carcharhinus sorrah</i> )	280	Harmless, no cases	Near threatened	Rarely seen at sea but one study recorded 65 mostly juveniles in local fish markets from Oct 2006-Dec 2008
Tiger shark ( <i>Galeocerdo cuvier</i> )	>550	95 unprovoked non-fatal attacks, 34 fatal	Near threatened	In 1995, tiger sharks caused three fatalities in eastern waters. The only verified sighting since was of a 1.6m juvenile caught in 2009. Tiger sharks undertake long-distance and often unpredictable migrations where they may ambush unsuspecting prey before moving to new areas. Takes a wide variety of living and dead food including other sharks and rays, turtles, bony fishes, and marine mammals
Milk shark ( <i>Rhizoprionodon acutus</i> )	Usually < 110	Harmless, no cases	Least concern	No confirmed records in recent decades, apparently locally extinct



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Family / species	Max. Length (cm)	Implicated in global shark attacks *	IUCN conservation status **	Notes
Grey sharpnose shark ( <i>Rhizoprionodon oligolinx</i> )	70	Harmless, no cases	Least concern	No confirmed records in recent decades, apparently locally extinct
Spadenose shark ( <i>Scoliodon laticaudus</i> )	74	Harmless, no cases	Near threatened	One of only two shark species that is still reasonably abundant in Hong Kong. It's long flattened spade-shaped snout with small eyes, and slender body is distinctive. Occurs in schools, and around rocky reefs but rarely seen underwater here. Females give birth to live young in June and July, and it seems likely that Hong Kong waters are a nursery ground
Great hammerhead ( <i>Sphyrna mokarran</i> )	550 - 610	15 unprovoked non-fatal attacks (all hammerhead species combined)	Critically endangered	No confirmed records in recent decades. As the species is nomadic, it was probably never resident here
Scalloped hammerhead ( <i>Sphyrna lewini</i> )	Around 400	15 unprovoked non-fatal attacks (all hammerhead species combined)	Critically endangered	Rarely seen at sea but a comprehensive study recorded 52 mostly juvenile individuals in local fish markets from Oct 2006-2008. Old records of smooth hammerhead ( <i>Sphyrna zygaena</i> ) are probably misidentifications of this species
<b>Rhincodontidae (Whale shark)</b>				
Whale shark ( <i>Rhincodon typus</i> )	Possibly 1700 - 2100	Largely harmless, but injuries have occurred through collisions when swimmers approach too closely	Endangered	Whale sharks apparently migrate south of Hong Kong in the summer months, and sub-adults occasionally venture into local waters. Whale sharks have a distinctive spotted pattern, and feed on plankton

\*Information from the International Shark Attack File, downloaded 30 June 2020. The ISAF has compiled records of shark attacks on people globally since the 1960s <https://www.floridamuseum.ufl.edu/shark-attacks/factors/species-implicated/>

\*\* IUCN Red List [www.iucnredlist.org](http://www.iucnredlist.org)



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Sharks are rarely encountered by swimmers and divers in Hong Kong, and the species that still persist in Hong Kong are largely harmless. Nevertheless, when swimming outside shark nets, the chances of encountering sharks can be reduced by swimming in groups, and avoiding twilight hours and darkness when sharks are more active and have a sensory advantage. Shark larger than 1.5m should be treated with caution, and you should calmly leave the water without excessive splashing if you see one. In the extremely unlikely event that you are attacked by a shark, be proactive and hit it on the snout – repeatedly if the attack does not stop – until you can exit the water.

Getting accurate records of shark sightings is critical for understanding their conservation status, and for management. Members of the public are encouraged to submit photographs/video of sharks or any sightings with time/date/location to AFCD (Tel: 1823 or email to [mailbox@afcd.gov.hk](mailto:mailbox@afcd.gov.hk)) and WWF ([shark@wwf.org.hk](mailto:shark@wwf.org.hk))

Compiled by Dr. Andy Cornish, Leader of Sharks: Restoring the Balance, WWF

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