


One of the benefits of this event was the collaboration that has developed between Fauna & Flora and the National Administration of Romanian Waters, the main governmental water management body. The results of Fauna & Flora's awareness-raising were also evident in the large number of Romanian Waters employees attending the conference. After the conference the chief engineer who led the Romanian Waters delegation proposed the development of a strategy and work plan to facilitate the restoration of the longitudinal connectivity of the country's rivers.

This openness from state institutions, as well as the positive feedback received from the attendees, encourages us to hope that the Dam Removal Movement in Romania will not limit itself to the organization of this event, but will result in the removal of as many obsolete barriers as possible and thus the restoration of longitudinal river connectivity.

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### All sawfish now Critically Endangered but sustained conservation efforts can lead to recovery

In November 2021, the IUCN Species Survival Commission Shark Specialist Group held a series of online workshops to reassess the Red List status of the five sawfish species (family Pristidae). This process concluded in December 2023 with the publication of the final assessment, for the narrow sawfish *Anoxypristis cuspidata*.








Since the previous assessments, conducted in 2012, sawfish have continued to face severe, ongoing threats from fishing and habitat loss, and collectively their status has worsened. Previously, three species were categorized as Critically Endangered and two as Endangered. With the reassessment of the narrow sawfish and dwarf sawfish *Pristis clavata*, all five species are now categorized as Critically Endangered. Based on the available evidence, population size reduction  $\geq 80\%$  was inferred or suspected over the last three generations as a result of a decline in their extent of occurrence and habitat quality, and potential levels of exploitation, and the causes of this reduction have not ceased. The latest assessments are disheartening and a reminder that continued actions to reduce mortality and protect critical habitats are urgently needed to prevent the extinction of sawfishes.

Nevertheless, some hope can be drawn from new information gathered during the reassessments. Several regions continue to support viable populations of some sawfish

species, including parts of northern Australia and Papua New Guinea. Additionally, there is strong evidence that the smalltooth sawfish *Pristis pectinata* is beginning to recover in Florida waters after 2 decades of sustained conservation efforts.

The past decade has also seen a shift in sawfish conservation, a sign that the 2014 Shark Specialist Group's Global Sawfish Conservation Strategy may be working (Yan et al., 2021, *Science Advances*, 7, 7). From relative obscurity, sawfish have moved into the conservation spotlight, with the emergence of several dedicated conservation initiatives, NGOs, directed funding and research programmes. This was reflected in the size and geographical diversity of the Red List reassessment team, which comprised 61 people from 25 nations.

Work over the last decade has provided a clearer picture of the global distribution of sawfishes, including in many poorly surveyed areas. This has led to the identification of sites where sawfishes continue to persist, amid intense pressure, such as in Bangladesh, Sudan and parts of Central America. Grassroots education and outreach programmes in these areas are leading to increased reports of sawfish being released alive. These initiatives are highlighting the potential to change attitudes toward these species and the urgent need for additional, similar approaches at the local level where sawfish are persisting.

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### Important Marine Mammal Areas celebrated—yet some are now in danger

2023 marked the 10-year anniversary of the IUCN Marine Mammal Protected Areas Task Force. In 2013, the Task Force began to develop a conservation tool—Important Marine Mammal Areas (IMMAs)—that marine spatial planners, protected area practitioners, governments, industry stakeholders and scientists could use to protect whales, dolphins and other marine mammals and their habitats. As of March 2024 the Task Force has worked with more than 300 scientists to examine 74.3% of the global ocean, identifying 280 IMMAs.

Important Marine Mammal Areas are defined as discrete portions of habitat, important to marine mammals, that have the potential to be delineated and managed for conservation. They are not legal designations but independent, peer-reviewed assessments based on criteria supported by data. Important Marine Mammal Areas are now being



Endangered Black Sea bottlenose dolphin *Tursiops truncatus ponticus* in an Important Marine Mammal Area in the war zone in the Black Sea. Photo: Elena Gladilina.

used in spatial planning in Malaysia, to create marine protected areas in Bangladesh and Viet Nam, by the United States Navy to avoid using low-frequency sonar in cetacean habitat, to establish International Maritime Organization Particularly Sensitive Sea Areas in the Mediterranean where fin and sperm whales are struck by ships, and by shipping companies transiting the Indian Ocean for route planning to reduce the risk of hitting whales. In total, the freely available IMMA package of shapefiles has been downloaded over 725 times from the IMMA website ([marinemammalhabitat.org/imma-eatlas](http://marinemammalhabitat.org/imma-eatlas)).

Yet, despite recent identification, some IMMAs are already threatened. In the Upper Gulf of California IMMA, the Critically Endangered vaquita *Phocoena sinus* has been reduced to c. 10 individuals despite numerous efforts to save the species from extinction. In six IMMAs created along the Ukrainian coast of the Black Sea around the habitat of threatened dolphin and porpoise subspecies, Black Sea harbour porpoises *Phocoena phocoena relicta* and Black Sea bottlenose *Tursiops truncatus ponticus* and common dolphins *Delphinus delphis ponticus* are dying and stranding in what has become a war zone. In the Bazaruto Archipelago to Inhambane Bay IMMA, off Mozambique, the Critically Endangered East African subpopulation of the dugong *Dugong dugon*, and the Endangered Indian Ocean humpback dolphin *Sousa plumbea* are threatened by seismic surveys for oil and gas development.

The Marine Mammal Protected Areas Task Force, joined by Whale and Dolphin Conservation (UK), is now initiating a programme to monitor and implement Important Marine Mammal Areas.

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## IUCN Species Survival Commission World Commission on Protected Areas Marine Mammal Protected Areas Task Force

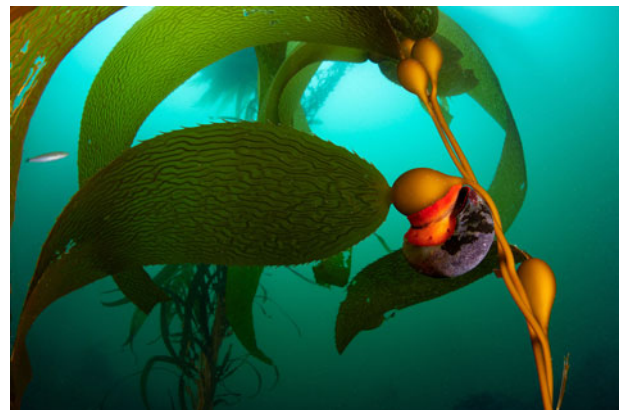
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### Introducing the Seaweed Specialist Group of the IUCN Species Survival Commission

In June 2023, the IUCN Species Survival Commission created the Seaweed Specialist Group. This international group of scientists and practitioners will work to assess and improve the conservation status of seaweeds, build networks and partnerships to prioritize conservation actions and communicate the importance of seaweed species.

Seaweeds (macroalgae) are found in all oceans and seas, with > 10,000 known marine species that include the red (Rhodophyta, c. 6,200 species), brown (Ochrophyta, c. 1,800) and green (Chlorophyta, c. 1,800) taxa. However, climate change and other anthropogenic stressors threaten many seaweeds globally, including iconic habitat-forming species such as kelps, fucoids and rhodoliths. The Seaweed Specialist Group has a global ecosystem and conservation focus, and we use our combined knowledge to inform decision-making and science-based actions for seaweed conservation. The group is diverse in geographical distribution and technical expertise, with members from all continents, because addressing the global and local challenges that seaweeds face requires diverse perspectives and skills.

Given the number of seaweed species, the Seaweed Specialist Group will initially prioritize conservation assessment, planning and action for key taxa. For example, there is an urgent need for management and conservation initiatives for more than 120 species of Laminarian kelps. Kelps are the dominant habitat-forming species found



Giant kelp forest of *Macrocystis pyrifera* in Baja California, Mexico, August 2023. Photo: Eduardo Sorensen, Mission Blue/Mas Kelp.