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the wildlife of UK's Overseas Territories (UKOTs) and
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FACT-SHEET ON:

Basking Shark *Cetorhinus maximus*
Crown Dependency: Isle of Man

The Isle of Man is a global hotspot for basking sharks, which are Endangered. The population centred on the Isle of Man (including Scottish and Irish waters) is estimated as 10,000-30,000, one of the largest sub-populations.

These are the world's second largest fish and, although they can grow to over 10 metres long and weigh up to 7 tonnes, they are gentle giants. They feed only on tiny plankton which they sieve out of the water by swimming through it with their vast mouths wide open. In the summer, this plankton comes to the sea surface, followed by the sharks, which appear to be 'basking' in the sun, hence their name. Between May and August, the Manx coastline welcomes this endangered species to feed on plankton blooms and possibly to mate and give birth in these waters.

Basking Sharks are highly migratory, filter-feeding sharks distributed mainly in the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans in coastal and pelagic habitats. They occur near the surface in temperate waters and deeper, below the thermocline to 1,264 m, in the tropics. The species has low biological productivity with limited fecundity and late age-at-maturity. Although no longer targeted, it is still caught as by-catch in trawl, trammel nets, and set-net fisheries, and becomes entangled in pot-lines. The large fins are extremely valuable in trade. Across regions, there have been severe historic declines. A global population reduction of 50–79% is suspected over the past three generations (102 years). Therefore, the Basking Shark is assessed as Endangered.

Up to 5 young are born after an estimated gestation of 12–36 months and a likely resting period of two years between litters. Female age-at-maturity is estimated at 16–20 years and maximum age estimated as 50 years; generation length is therefore 34 years. Annual rate of population increase is estimated at 1.3–2.3% and natural mortality is low at 7% per year.

In the Northeast Atlantic, the landings of Basking Sharks declined dramatically during the period 1946–2017: peaking in the mid-1960s and mid-1970s at around 5,000 tonne (t) [approx. 1000 sharks], declining rapidly during the 1980s to less than 1,000 t [~200] annually, after which there was a peak in 1992 of 1,697 t [~340], followed by a rapid decline. Following the ban on target Basking Shark fisheries in 2006–2007, landings declined to <30 t [~6] annually and have been <0.1 t [~0.2 shark] since 2013. The large catch declines during the 1960s to 1980s are believed to reflect unsustainable fishing levels and a decline in population abundance. Public record sightings and boat surveys around the UK for 1988–2008 suggest population recovery following cessation of targeting in the mid-2000s. However, when current research survey encounter rates are compared with historical target fishery catch rates, the population is estimated to be well below 30% of historical abundance.

Globally, to allow recovery, IUCN recommend that all Basking Shark retention and landings be prohibited, at least as long as the global population is classified as Endangered. Initiatives



Above: Basking shark. © Isle of Man Government .

Below: Basking Shark in Peel Bay, Isle of Man © Manx Wildlife Trust. Although they can be seen all round the island, the stretch from Peel on the west coast, south to the Calf of Man is where they can most reliably be found. They can easily be seen from the shore, especially from spots like Peel Castle (see photo), Niarbyl, Port Erin and the Sound.



to avoid contact, prevent capture, promote safe release, and improve catch (including discard) reporting are also urgently needed, as is full implementation of additional commitments agreed through international treaties. Basking Shark tourism is managed in some locations but, if sustainable tourism industries are indeed to be developed around encounters with these sharks, they should be legislated, continuously monitored, and enforced with permitting systems to make sure operators and tourists are adhering to best practice protocols and codes of conduct.