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Conserving The Cearban

The Marine Conservation Society Basking Shark Watch

Basking sharks - a species under threat

LAZILY CRUISING plankton-rich west coast waters on calm summer days, the magnificent Basking Shark (*Cetorhinus maximus* in latin or Cearban in Gaelic), harmless 5 tonne cousin of the Great White, is familiar to many a reader of Scottish Diver. So what's the story of this unique creature.

Prior to the late eighteenth century, when a targeted fishery became established, Scottish harvesting of these gentle giants was limited to the occasional stranding. Coast and island dwellers sought the fine oil from the sharks' enormous livers, yielding a less smoky flame in their lamps than other oils. Additional uses included tanning hide, tempering hot steel to give a tough flexible blade, embrocating joint pain and, on an industrial scale as the fishery expanded preparing wool for carding and softening hemp for rope-making. More recently, the oil has been used as an aviation lubricant, within cosmetics and, encapsulated, to strengthen the human immune system. The last Scottish basking shark fishery operated by Howard McCrindle ceased in 1994.

Although a Norwegian fishery in EU waters has been in decline since 1994, a sinister emerging trade may yet precipitate both legal and illegal landings. Whereas liver oil plummeted in value from £550 to £250 per ton between the 1970s and 1990s, basking shark fin rocketed from £3000 to £20,000 per ton. An expanding Far Eastern market for shark fin soup, increasingly consumed as a sign of prestige, fuels the burgeoning trade. Lacking the most basic life cycle and migration data this growing threat remains difficult to quantify yet we do know basking sharks mature slowly and produce remarkably few offspring (6 in the only recorded litter) making them extremely vulnerable to exploitation. Bycatch also

threatens basking sharks as fishermen can accidentally trawl specimens from deeper waters.

After a ten year campaign, gathering 12,777 sightings from keen MCS 'Basking Shark Watch' volunteers, the Marine Conservation Society helped secure basking shark protection in 1998 under Schedule 5 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981). The Act prohibits harvesting and reckless disturbance of basking sharks in all UK territorial waters (out to 12nm). Some protection is also afforded in US Atlantic and New Zealand waters. However despite being listed as vulnerable on a 1996 IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature) Red List of threatened animals, a bid to list the basking shark under Appendix II of CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species) in April 2000 failed.

Feeding at the surface, their dorsal and tail fin sometimes the snout, poking out, basking sharks slowly filter for plankton up to 2000 m³ of seawater per hour. While making them vulnerable to human impact, this habit has also enabled collection of much distribution data. Basking Sharks, predominantly immature females, cruise into Cornish waters in April, possibly tracking tidal fronts rich in zooplankton, and are sighted progressively northwards – Isle of Man, Solway Firth, Firth of Clyde, Sea of Hebrides, Minch - before migrating offshore in September. Across the Atlantic, most observed specimens are male, suggesting migration is sex and even age segregated. Regardless their over wintering grounds remain a mystery. Rich in squalene, a hydrocarbon present in high concentrations in deep sea shark livers, basking shark liver oil may hint at a deep water retreat.

Although protected in UK waters out to 12nm, MCS would like to see the Basking Shark protected out to 200nm in EU waters

and listed on CITES Appendix 2, preventing legal trade in their fins. Towards this end, and making a significant contribution to the UK Basking Shark Biodiversity Action Plan, MCS Basking Shark Watch was re-launched in 2001 with support from the International Fund for Animal Welfare.

During the April to September season, 81 reports from divers, sailors, holidaymakers and other sea-goers documented 159 mainly solitary basking sharks in Scotland, with most sightings taking place in July (28 reports) and August (20 reports). A group of 13 were recorded on Lady Isle Bank on August 9, 7 groups of more than five were spotted - including Wigtown Bay, Gunna Sound, Loch Fyne and off Arran - and a few groups of two or three. Most sharks were feeding although three reports of breaching behaviour were recorded in Loch Fyne on June 17, July 25 and August 7. Sharks greater than 8m were recorded on 15 occasions while those less than 2m, on only four. Many thanks to all those who reported sightings making a valuable contribution to the MCS campaign for increased basking shark protection.

And finally...if you would like to report valuable sightings during the 2002 season, or have any queries, please contact MCS Scotland on (0131) 226 6360 or email mcs.scotland@care4free.net and receive a Basking Shark Watch poster/factsheet and recording card. Simply fill details of time, position, approximate size and behaviour of sighted sharks on the card, return to MCS and help expand our sightings database. Alternatively, why not become a member of MCS and receive our quarterly members magazine and free marine identification cards. For the latest news on Basking Shark Watch and all our other campaigns, please visit www.mcsuk.org.

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