

WWF-Malaysia partners with Sabah coastal communities to protect sharks, rays

By **Olivia Miwil** June 8, 2026



Conservation crew spotted a shovelnose ray during an underwater survey in Tigabu, Sabah. – © Jürgen Freund/WWF

KOTA KINABALU: WWF-Malaysia is working with coastal communities in Sabah to conserve sharks and rays amid concerns over declining populations.

In a survey conducted between November 2023 and December 2024, WWF-Malaysia and Universiti Malaysia Sabah counted, measured and recorded sharks and rays brought ashore at fish markets and landing sites across Kota Kinabalu and Sandakan.

The research, approved and supported by the Sabah Fisheries Department, recorded 1,748 sharks and 2,890 rays representing 34 shark species and 45 ray species, respectively.

"Early analyses show that at least 80 per cent of sharks and 93 per cent of rays captured were immature, caught before they could reproduce.

"This is particularly concerning as these animals take 12 to 15 years to reach reproductive age, meaning every early death is a significant blow to their populations," a WWF-Malaysia statement said.

Sharks and rays play an important role in maintaining marine ecosystems by regulating prey populations, stirring up sediments and cycling nutrients.

WWF-Malaysia senior marine programme officer Serena Adam said the organisation was now working closely with coastal communities following the findings.

"Not just to monitor incidental catches but to build awareness, buy-in, and capacity for live release of juveniles," she said.

Through a pilot programme led by WWF-Malaysia, 13 fishers in Tun Mustapha Park volunteered to release juvenile sharks and rays caught alive.

Of the 49 sharks and rays recorded by participating fishers, 61 per cent were landed alive and successfully released back into the sea. The released species included bamboo sharks, catsharks, whitespotted whiprays, Jenkins' whiprays and smaller stingray species.

WWF-Malaysia head of marine Chitra Devi said the engagement with fishing communities went beyond raising awareness.

"Our officers sit with fishers in focus group discussions, hearing firsthand how shark and ray populations have changed over the years.

"By placing trained enumerators within villages, we're not just gathering data, we're building trust and empowering communities with knowledge that strengthens conservation from the ground up," she said.