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Does recreational fishing impact the sustainability of Queensland's shark populations?

A newly-published study has investigated whether recreational fishing could be affecting shark and ray populations in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park.

The study was conducted by Ann-Maree Lynch as part of her Honours research project through the Fishing and Fisheries Research Centre at James Cook University (JCU), and was jointly funded by JCU and the Australian Government's Marine and Tropical Sciences Research Facility (MTSRF).

According to Dr Steve Sutton, a co-author of the study, there are growing concerns internationally over the decline of shark and ray populations, and the implications of these declines for marine ecosystems.

"Commercial fishing has traditionally been seen as a larger threat to sharks and rays than recreational fishing. However, with approximately 180,000 active recreational fishers living adjacent to the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park, and an additional 570,000 fishers state-wide, there is also the potential for recreational fishing to have a significant impact," explained Dr Sutton.

The study involved a self-reporting survey of 309 recreational fishers along the Queensland coastline to examine the recreational catch and harvest of sharks and rays, and to explore recreational fishers' handling behaviour and attitudes. Key findings of the survey included:

- Sharks and rays represented 6% of the total catch (including released catch), and 0.8% of fishers' total harvest (ie retained catch).
- The majority of sharks and rays caught were released primarily because they were perceived as being inedible.
- Recreational fishers reported that their handling and release behaviour was largely consistent with 'best practice' guidelines, with the exception of the types of hooks used.
- Most fishers had positive attitudes towards sharks and rays, placing high importance on releasing them in good condition (86%), high value on their existence (84%) and relatively low value on catching them (63%).

