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National Marine Fisheries Service
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2024 AFSC Seminar Series

Dean Grubbs, Florida State University Coastal & Marine Laboratory
Tuesday, March 5th @ 10 am Pacific

Smalltooth sawfish: 20 years after ESA listing, is there hope for this critically endangered marine predator?



Understanding the ecology of large marine predators is challenging due to their naturally low abundances, a concealing environment and the logistical constraints associated with capture and handling. These difficulties are compounded for rare and imperiled taxa. Smalltooth sawfish (*Pristis pectinata*) populations declined dramatically in the last half of the 20th century throughout the range due to overfishing and habitat loss. The species is restricted to the Atlantic Ocean, historically occupying coastal waters from North Carolina to central Brazil in the western Atlantic as well as most of

West Africa in the eastern Atlantic. The only known viable populations remaining are in the U.S. (Florida) and The Bahamas (mostly Andros Island). Smalltooth sawfish have been protected in Florida since 1992, and in 2003 the U.S. population was listed as Endangered under the U.S. Endangered Species Act, the first native marine fish to be listed. While all international trade is prohibited through CITES Appendix I, sawfish can be harvested legally in countries such as The Bahamas with no specific protections in place. Since 2011, graduate students and I have been using fishery-independent surveys as well as acoustic and satellite telemetry to study migration, habitat use, and changes in distribution and relative abundance to assess the viability of U.S. and Bahamian smalltooth sawfish populations. Our work to date suggests the U.S. population is relatively large and robust and following decades of protection, there are positive signs that recovery is taking place. In contrast, the Bahamian population appears to be much smaller and perhaps susceptible to extirpation. I will discuss the research methods we use and our major findings after more than a decade of work on this very large, unusual, and highly vulnerable marine predator.



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