

SHARK HARD TALK

By Richard Peirce

Interview with Ian Burrett

Richard Peirce talks to Ian Burrett who is Vice Chairman of the Scottish Sea Anglers Conservation Network (SSACN), members of which are engaged in shark angling and tagging.



Ian Burrett. © SSACN.

RP Ian, its Richard from the Shark Trust here to ask what our readers are interested in, and pulling no punches.

Ian No problem.

RP What are the aims of SSACN?

Ian SSACN's main aims are to promote the regeneration of inshore fish stocks.

RP Sharks, or all fish?

Ian SSACN promote all stocks, and a branch is the Scottish shark tagging programme.

RP There are many who question shark angling and its values. How can angling be of benefit to sharks?

Ian Mainly in data gathering, there is no way the government can afford to pay scientists to catch sharks and tag them.

RP Does shark angling have a measurable economic benefit to Scotland?

Ian Absolutely, it is thought that Tope in southwest Scotland could be worth between £6 and £8 million, and Spurdog and Common Skate on the west coast anything up to £10 million.

RP Big figures, how are they arrived at?

Ian They come from a Caledonian University study which showed the total value of recreational sea angling (RSA) in Scotland is a minimum of £142 million, but could be up to £200 million. We are trying to get an economics student to break down the figures.

RP This is people coming to Scotland; what they are eating, what they are drinking, their hotels etc?

Ian Yes it's all angling related income for Scotland.

RP Do you think anglers should be tagging sharks if that activity doesn't produce data for scientific and conservation purposes?

Ian Tagging won't go ahead unless it is for scientific purposes, it's all data gathering for shark management plans. The Community Plan of Action (for sharks) (CPOA) calls for data gathering of stock fluctuations and stock dynamics, sex, etc. The government is not going to do it, it is left to the shark enthusiast.

RP So you wouldn't be in favour of tagging as a way of justifying catching sharks? Only when it has a solid scientific purpose?

Ian I have no problem with people fishing for sharks without the tagging, because I believe the mortality rate is so low.

RP The 'Sharkatag' website lists the aims of the project to "tag as many fish as possible from shore and boat to highlight the urgent need for shark, ray and skate conservation in Scottish waters and to raise public awareness of sea angling". How is the programme doing that?

Ian The public awareness is coming from the fact that the BBC seems to find shark tagging sexy, we've had probably four or five programmes in the last year. Before this people in Scotland weren't aware there were any sharks.

RP Where is the data going, how's it being collated, and will it be published?

Ian We've got 50% of the funding so far and we are hoping to get the other 50%. Then it will be a case of a PhD student writing it up.

RP Last year on Shark L – the online discussion forum – there was some speculation that Sharkatag was a commercial enterprise? How do you comment?

Ian A commercial enterprise?

RP This was being discussed on the internet. This is basically a chance for you to say total b-ll---s or whatever?

Ian Total b-ll---s. There were three charter boats involved, I gave my time free, one of the Whitehaven boats gave their time free, and the other one was private.

RP Fair enough.

RP What specific training are anglers given prior to tagging?

Ian We have a certificated course to become an approved tagger. The tagger has to sit with an instructor, it takes about half an hour, discussing the handling of sharks, the codes of practice, how to stick the darts in, how to weigh and measure the fish in terms of length and girth, but the main emphasis is on careful handling of sharks. Once they have got their certificates they are encouraged to go on a charter boat with an experienced tagger.

RP Presumably one of the course components is the right kind of tag for the size of shark?

Ian After a lot of research, we have streamlined it down to one tag size, although we are looking at smaller tags for smaller fish.

RP These are return tags?

Ian Yes.

RP Do you have any data on survival rates for sharks that have been released?

Ian There is no data on survival rates in the UK. The Glasgow Museum Common Skate programme has got a 33% recapture rate, which I believe is the highest recapture rate in the world of any species.

RP It probably would be.

Ian Recently we held a skate tagging weekend and there was a 210 lb skate caught in the morning, and at 3.00 p.m. it was caught again, which shows it doesn't stress them. If a fish was stressed it would go off its feed, and we wouldn't catch them again, but these fish are often caught twice the same day.

RP So there is no data saying they survive, but equally no data saying they don't?

Ian I suppose the only way you could say that they don't is if they start getting washed up on beaches, and that's never happened.

RP I believe Article 47 caused a massive response from the sea angling community. What's your take on article 47?

* NOTE. Article 47 (55) was a Control Regulation of the CPOA which dealt with landings of endangered species, and angling was included against Total Allowable Catches (T.A.C.'s)

Ian Article 47 has been replaced by Article 55. I don't think there is any reason to be fearful of Article 55, although it may affect cod fishermen

RP So you wouldn't say recreational angling should be subject to quotas or bag limits?

Ian I have no problem with bag limits for endangered species, or even local resident populations.

RP I believe Article 47 led the Scottish Sea Anglers conservation network to leave the Shark Alliance. What was the background?

Ian This was to do with Pew. When we first got involved with the Shark Alliance, although I knew Pew was one of many funders, there was no mention of Pew in the paperwork. Pew was very much in the sidelines, after it started getting successes it became the Pew Shark Alliance, and the Pew position on recreational fishing is that it should be banned.

RP I can see that an organisation that wanted to ban recreational sea angling and your organisation wouldn't agree?

Ian We had no choice, I wrote asking for Pew's position on recreational angling and they want it stopped. We couldn't stay within the Alliance while Pew was funding it.

RP If humans have injured an animal to a point where survival is in question, then the moral obligation is to dispatch that animal efficiently, quickly and as painlessly as possible. How do your anglers get the training to be able to judge whether the animal they have caught is past survival, and if they have so decided, do they get the training to know how to euthanise it quickly?

Ian The use of a priest is encouraged, which is a lump of wood with lead in the end to give it a sharp blow to the head. After twenty years of fishing I wouldn't like to say if a fish is in danger or not. We catch fish with huge lumps out of them, where seals or Tope have got them, and it is healed over and they have survived.

RP I was thinking of deep-hooked animals where it proves impossible to get the hook out, and perhaps might be bleeding from the gills.

Ian I caught a conger once with six hooks in its gut, some had lines hanging out, some were so rotted that the hole where the line went in was rotted away, there were no signs of cancerous-type cysts, I'm fairly convinced that if it goes into the gut, and the line is cut, and is not dangling or lying around, then they will survive. They have got more chance of surviving in the sea than being knocked on the head.

RP Should all the countries in the British Isles be adopting the same shark laws?

Ian It would make sense. Some of the work needs to be Scotland specific, because we have what we consider unique populations of Spurdog. Tope certainly are a migratory species, so it makes sense to have a European law for them.

RP Porbeagle now has a zero TAC but can still be caught by anglers. Do you think that an animal listed as critically endangered should still be able to be targeted by an activity that might produce a risk of mortality?

Ian You could argue that we haven't reduced them to endangered levels, therefore why the hell should we be picking up the pieces? One could also argue that because recreational angling provides so much for the local economy, even if the odd shark did die that can be justified. I suspect that there will be many who would disagree on that one.

RP How do you see the future of shark angling in Scotland, and more widely in the rest of the Britain?

Ian I suspect that the Wildlife and Countryside Act may have some bearing on what we are allowed to do. I think it would be folly to stop people fishing for sharks because of the good work we are doing with the data gathering. The worst-case scenario is that people who fish for sharks must be part of an approved tagging scheme.

RP How have hooks, lines and techniques changed?

Ian There is a growing movement to use circular hooks and if it goes deep into the gut it just pulls clear and catches the side of the mouth. The other is awareness of what is actually happening on the bottom of the traces, I mentioned earlier we have shortened skate traces from 8 foot long to 18 inches so we can hit the fish early. Braid is a lot thinner than nylon, so you can fish much lighter leads and can actually feel what's happening at the biting end.

RP What about degradability of hooks?

Ian For the bigger sharks they make a very fast rotting composite hook. People in the New York tournament use them on the Blues and things, but they haven't really brought them down to the smaller sizes.

RP Thanks Ian it's been good talking to you.

Ian No problem, thank you.



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