

Elasmobranch Conservation Strategy for Northern Ireland 2026 - 2035



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and Rural Affairs**
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An Roinn
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Ministerial Foreword



I am pleased to introduce Northern Ireland's first Elasmobranch Conservation Strategy, which sets out a shared vision and framework for the conservation and recovery of our elasmobranch species - sharks, skates and rays.

Elasmobranchs have inhabited our seas for millions of years and play a vital role in maintaining healthy, resilient marine ecosystems. However, many species have experienced significant declines both globally and locally, with some now considered threatened or critically endangered. The loss of these species has implications not only for marine biodiversity but also for the health and functioning of the wider marine environment on which we all depend.

Northern Ireland's waters support a diverse range of elasmobranch species and habitats, highlighting our shared responsibility to protect and conserve these important animals for future generations. In addition to their ecological importance, elasmobranchs contribute to our understanding and appreciation of the marine environment and have the potential to support wildlife tourism and wider societal benefits.

This Strategy provides a coordinated approach to addressing the pressures facing elasmobranchs in Northern Ireland, and identifies the actions needed to improve our understanding of their status, enhance conservation and management measures, reduce human-induced threats, and support population recovery. Its successful delivery will contribute not only to the conservation of individual species but also to the wider health, resilience and sustainability of Northern Ireland's marine environment.

The development of this Strategy has been informed by a collaborative co-design process involving representatives from across government, academia, industry, environmental organisations and the wider marine community. I would like to extend my sincere thanks to all those who contributed their time, expertise and commitment throughout its development. The valuable feedback received during public consultation has also helped shape and strengthen the final Strategy.

Achieving meaningful conservation outcomes will require continued partnership working and collective action. I encourage all those with an interest in our marine environment to play their part in supporting the delivery of the actions set out in this Strategy. By working together, we can improve the conservation status of elasmobranchs in Northern Ireland's waters and help secure a healthier and more resilient marine environment for generations to come.

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Introduction

Sharks, skates and rays, collectively known as elasmobranchs, are vital to the health and stability of marine ecosystems. The biodiversity of elasmobranch species in a given area is a direct indicator of ocean and ecosystem health¹. However, global populations of elasmobranchs have experienced significant declines since the 1950s, driven by overfishing, bycatch, habitat degradation, illegal fin trade and the accelerating impacts of climate change. The loss in biodiversity of elasmobranchs can have a knock-on effect throughout the entire marine ecosystem.

In Northern Ireland, the absence of species such as Angel shark, unrecorded in local waters for decades, highlights the urgent need for targeted conservation. The Northern Ireland marine area is ecologically significant, forming part of a wider Irish Sea migratory corridor between Scotland, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland that supports critically endangered species such as the Common (Flapper) Skate².

This vital and interconnected sea area provides critical habitats for elasmobranch species across their lifecycles. Many elasmobranch species have incredibly extended life spans, often ranging anywhere from 50 to 100 years. In addition, some species display long gestation periods, e.g. Spurdog (*Squalus acanthias*) can gestate for 18 – 22 months. These biological traits make population recovery slow and underscore the need for proactive, long-term conservation planning.

This **Elasmobranch Conservation Strategy for Northern Ireland** (hereafter ‘the Strategy’) outlines a roadmap for the protection, monitoring and management of elasmobranch species in Northern Ireland waters.

¹ [Importance of sharks in ocean ecosystems- Motivarash et al. \(2020\)](#)

² Genetic research (Iglésias et al., 2009) indicates that the species reported as *Dipturus batis* is comprised of two species of *Dipturus* - provisionally *D. flossada* (Blue skate) and *D. intermedius* (Flapper skate). The classification of the ‘Common skate’ is therefore currently being updated. The scientific name ‘*Dipturus batis*’ is cited within the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 as amended and is therefore used for the purposes of regulation. The Northern Ireland Priority Species list under the Wildlife and Natural Environment Act 2011 had originally grouped Flapper skate and Common Blue skate together as ‘Common Skate’, however, following a recent review, it was concluded that the majority of records within Northern Ireland waters related to Flapper skate, with Common Blue skate predominantly occurring within deeper offshore habitats. Consequently, Flapper skate is retained within the species list.

Purpose

DAERA has developed an Elasmobranch Conservation Strategy in recognition that current measures are insufficient to address the pressures on vulnerable shark, skate and ray species. Elasmobranchs are vital to the health and balance of marine ecosystems, yet many species are experiencing population declines (refer to [Annex D](#)) due to pressures associated with fishing and habitat degradation. Some elasmobranch species that are endemic to, or have a stronghold in, Northern Ireland also require continued, coordinated management to maintain healthy population levels.

There are 12 elasmobranch species on the Northern Ireland Priority Species list, meaning they are considered of principal importance for the purpose of conserving biodiversity. While the **Marine Act (Northern Ireland) 2013**³ provides a legal basis for the designation of Marine Conservation Zones (MCZs) where evidence supports protection of nationally important marine species, habitats and features of geological or geomorphological interest, no MCZs are designated specifically for elasmobranchs. However, some species can indirectly benefit from management measures introduced in MPAs. The implementation of the **Marine Protected Areas (Prohibited Methods of Fishing) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2022**⁴, which came into force in January 2023, prohibit mobile bottom fishing in nine inshore MPAs, removing habitat disturbance and allowing seabed habitats to recover with associated benefits for wider biodiversity, ecosystem resilience and the species that depend upon these habitats.

Recognising that knowledge gaps continue to constrain effective management of many elasmobranch species, this Strategy provides a robust, evidence-based approach to conservation, facilitating targeted action, improved monitoring, and adaptive management.

Although focused on 12 priority elasmobranch species, the Strategy promotes measures that will deliver wider ecosystem benefits across elasmobranch populations and marine biodiversity more broadly. Through the establishment of clear priorities and governance structures, it is intended to support the recovery and resilience of elasmobranch populations in Northern Ireland waters. Furthermore, implementation of the Strategy will deliver on international obligations to protect and preserve the marine environment and its species

³ [Marine Act \(NI\) 2013](#)

⁴ [The MPAs \(Prohibited Methods of Fishing\) \(Amendment\) Regulations \(NI\) 2022](#)

under the **OSPAR North-East Atlantic Environment Strategy 2030**⁵ and will contribute to target 4 of the **Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF)**⁶.

Scope

The Northern Ireland marine area comprises the ‘inshore’ and ‘offshore’ regions⁷. Northern Ireland’s waters abut those of Scotland, Wales, the Isle of Man and Ireland. While this Strategy applies to the Northern Ireland inshore region (Figure 1) as defined in Section 2 of the Marine Act (Northern Ireland) 2013 (‘the Marine Act’)⁸, it is recognised that many elasmobranch species use a much wider area, crossing multiple jurisdictions as a natural aspect of their ecological behaviour, with implications for their management and conservation.

⁵ [Strategy of the OSPAR Commission for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the North-East Atlantic 2030](#)

⁶ [Global Biodiversity Framework \(GBF\)](#)

⁷ as defined at Section 322 of the [Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009](#)

⁸ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nia/2013/10/contents/data.pdf>

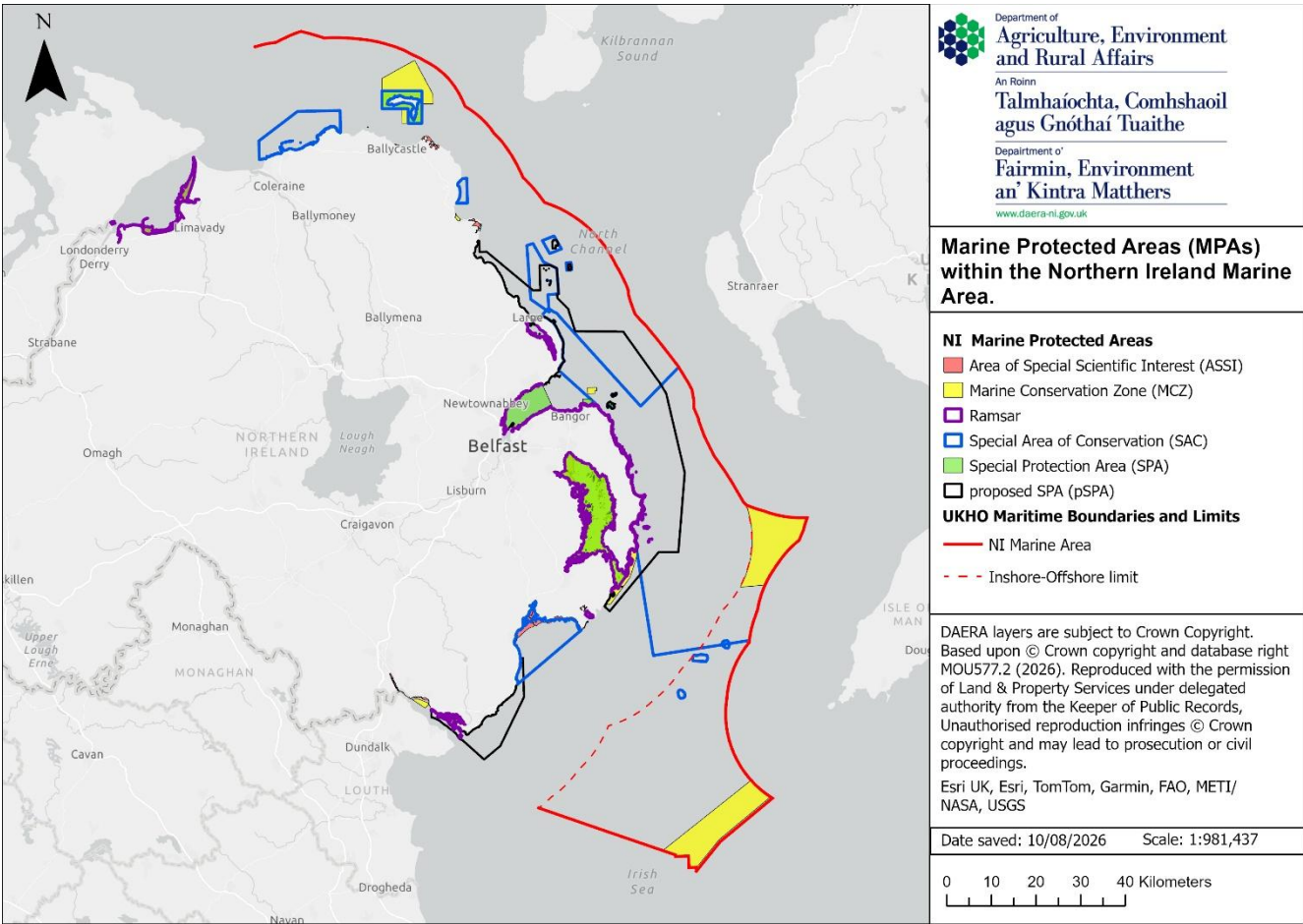


Figure 1: The Northern Ireland Inshore and Offshore Regions showing the Marine Protected Areas network.

Outcome

The outcome from this Strategy will be that:

Elasmobranch populations in Northern Ireland waters are recovering and resilient, with reduced pressures and effective management in place to support their long-term conservation alongside sustainable marine use.

Aim

The aim of this Strategy is to:

Develop robust management guidance to support conservation measures for elasmobranch species, while delivering on international obligations to protect and preserve the marine environment.

In relation to the outcome above and delivering on the aim, by 2035, our actions will deliver:

- **High-resolution distribution maps** for Northern Ireland Priority Elasmobranch species to inform future policy and marine planning decisions.
- **Spatial mapping of pressures and threats** to identify areas of overlap between elasmobranch distributions and human activities.
- Increased **public engagement through citizen science**, improving conservation knowledge and awareness of elasmobranch species.
- Promotion of **best practice for all water users** to minimise impacts on elasmobranchs and their habitats.
- Investment in **a range of bycatch reduction initiatives** delivered through collaborative projects and programmes.

Strategic Actions

Eight key Strategic Actions were identified for this Strategy. They have been placed into four themes. However in many cases, the actions will deliver across more than one theme.

Governance and strategic oversight

1. Establish an inclusive governance structure to oversee the implementation of the Action Plan, including the setting of SMART timeframes where possible and undertaking iterative review of the Strategy.

Evidence and knowledge base

2. Establish and maintain robust baselines for the priority elasmobranch species and publish current state of Northern Ireland populations.
3. Identify and publish the relevant threats and pressures to elasmobranchs in Northern Ireland waters.

Conservation measures and mitigation

4. Develop options to strengthen protection for elasmobranchs in Northern Ireland waters.
5. Develop, implement and evaluate effectiveness of mitigation measures to reduce elasmobranch bycatch and entanglement.
6. Increase awareness of the enforcement actions available to the Department and promote collaborative approaches with partners to support compliance and conservation outcomes.

Communication

7. Review, evaluate and enhance current practices for managing wildlife interactions.
8. Raise awareness of the importance of elasmobranchs in Northern Ireland, fostering engagement, stewardship and shared responsibility for their conservation among all water users.

Each of the strategic actions is supported by prescriptive actions, as detailed in the Action Plan ([Annex A](#)), which on implementation will contribute to achieving the outcome of elasmobranch recovery and resilience.

The Strategy does not have SMART timeframes as this reflects the dependence on stakeholders for co-delivery as well as the variable availability of funding. Instead, the Department will work with the Northern Ireland Elasmobranch Conservation Working Group to apply SMART timeframes where possible to the actions contained in the Action Plan.

Species list

The Strategy covers the 12 Northern Ireland Priority Species of elasmobranch (refer to Table 2) including those that are commonly found in Northern Ireland waters, those in decline and those less frequently observed. Further information on each species in relation to their conservation status is provided in [Annex D](#).

The Strategy adopts a two-strand approach of “Management” and “Monitoring”.

Management covers those species that are more common or well-studied and have targeted conservation actions. Monitoring covers those data-poor or cryptic species to ensure overall inclusion but retains the flexibility to be reallocated to Management as data becomes available and/or population shifts occur. Table 2 outlines the species list and the categories under which they fall. Furthermore, those species currently listed on the Department of Health (DoH) project licences have been prioritised as a starting point for data collection through tagging efforts. To date, this includes Flapper Skate, Tope and Spurdog.

It is important to note that the Species list is not exhaustive, and that efforts such as habitat improvements, ecosystem restoration, and broader conservation actions can provide positive benefits to all elasmobranch species.

Table 1: List of priority elasmobranch species and the two-strand approach - monitoring and management – which are based on current levels of knowledge and evidence.

Approach	Common Name	Scientific Name
Management	Basking shark	<i>Cetorhinus maximus</i>
	Cuckoo ray	<i>Leucoraja naevus</i>
	Flapper skate	<i>Dipturus intermedius</i>
	Porbeagle	<i>Lamna nasus</i>
	Spurdog	<i>Squalus acanthias</i>
	Thornback ray	<i>Raja clavata</i>
	Tope	<i>Galeorhinus galeus</i>
	Spotted ray	<i>Raja montagui</i>
Monitoring	Angel shark	<i>Squatina squatina</i>
	Blonde ray	<i>Raja brachyura</i>
	Undulate ray	<i>Raja undulata</i>
	White skate	<i>Rostroraja alba</i>

Wildlife versus Commercial Species

The Department recognises the importance of distinguishing ‘wildlife’ species from ‘commercial’ species, while also noting that some species may hold value in both contexts, or may have shifted from one category to the other with time. Wildlife and commercial elasmobranch species differ mainly in how they are used, their management and their protection under ecological, legal, and economic frameworks.

Wildlife species of elasmobranchs are generally not targeted or landed for commercial sale (e.g., Basking Shark, Angel Shark, Flapper Skate). While both categories contribute to

natural ecosystems and have biological value, wildlife species are often protected under conservation laws.

Commercially exploited species of elasmobranchs (e.g. Spurdog, Thornback Ray) are targeted or retained by fisheries for economic purposes such as seafood, bait, or sport fishing. These species may be landed, sold, or processed and are often subject to fisheries management regulations.

Policy and legislative protection of elasmobranchs in Northern Ireland

There are a number of mechanisms in place for the protection of elasmobranchs in Northern Ireland waters, as outlined below:

1. The Marine Plan for Northern Ireland

The **draft Marine Plan**, and once adopted, **the Marine Plan for Northern Ireland**, provides a framework to be used by all decision makers to enable them to facilitate sustainable marine development. The Marine Plan is built on overarching UK and Northern Ireland legislation and seeks to safeguard out biologically diverse marine area and enable the sustainable and productive use of this valuable resource.

Most activities including certain scientific surveys in the marine environment require a marine licence under Part 4 of the **Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009**⁹ or are regulated through another statutory authorisation system.

Public authorities must take authorisation decisions in accordance with the policies in the Marine Plan and comply with the legal requirements for protected species including protection of their essential habitats, and prevention of damage to places used for shelter or protection. The draft Marine Plan sets out how the Precautionary Principle and Mitigation Hierarchy should be applied to decision-making.

2. Biodiversity Duty

The Wildlife and Natural Environment Act (Northern Ireland) 2011¹⁰ (the WANE Act) places a statutory duty on public bodies to conserve and enhance biodiversity. **The Biodiversity Duty** (Section 1 (1)) extends beyond protected sites and requires all public bodies to further the conservation of biodiversity, and to look for opportunities to enhance or restore biodiversity.

⁹ [Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009](#)

¹⁰ [Wildlife and Natural Environment Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2011](#)

The Biodiversity Lists under the WANE Act define those Priority Habitats and Species which are of principal importance for the purpose of conserving biodiversity and that public bodies should take steps to further the conservation of; this includes all elasmobranch species listed in this Strategy as detailed in [Annex D](#).

3. The Wildlife Order

Under the **Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 (as amended)**¹¹ Angel Shark, Basking Shark and Common (Flapper) Skate are protected from unlawful killing or injury. This includes making it an offence to intentionally or recklessly kill, injure or take them, or damage, destroy or obstruct access to any place which they use for shelter or protection. They are listed as Schedule 5 Animals (Animals which are protected at all times). However, Angel Shark and Common (Flapper) Skate are only protected out to 6nm (coastal waters).

¹¹ [The Wildlife \(Northern Ireland\) Order 1985](#)

Implementation of the Action Plan

Governance

The Elasmobranch Conservation Working Group (the ‘Working Group’) will be responsible for overseeing the delivery and review of the Action Plan required to meet the aim of the Strategy, including the setting of SMART timeframes for the Action Plan where possible. The Working Group will operate within the governance framework of the Marine Nature Recovery Oversight Group, ensuring alignment with the **Environmental Improvement Plan for Northern Ireland**¹² (EIP) and other marine nature recovery strategies as well as accountability for the delivery of the Action Plan. The Working Group will regularly review Actions to ensure these are addressed and can allocate and amend SMART timeframes as targets are met. There are cross-linkages between the Actions, and these will be delivered concurrently. The Department and partners will co-deliver the Action Plan, continuing the co-design approach employed for the Strategy to date.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Progress towards delivering the Actions will be assessed through an ongoing programme of monitoring and evaluation. The Working Group will need to agree delivery partners, set timeframes and consider new proposals or identify priority research needs to contribute to the Action Plan. Through annual meetings of the Working Group, delivery partners will present and report on the status of assigned actions. This will enable assessment of the effectiveness of proposed conservation and management measures. This process will also support the review of new evidence and species ahead of the Strategy’s first formal review in 2030, aligning it with other Departmental strategies, action plans and EIP targets.

The Marine Nature Recovery Oversight Group (MNROG) will have oversight of delivery of all the Department’s conservation strategies, ensure their collective alignment and publish annual reports detailing progress of actions against EIP targets and timelines. Details on

¹² [Environmental Improvement Plan for Northern Ireland | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs](#)

other high level legislative drivers and policy targets which the Strategy will deliver against are included in [Annex B](#).

Success of the Action Plan will also be determined through wider assessments carried out at a UK level:

- **Fisheries Act 2020**¹³: fisheries authorities to report every three years on the implementation of the Joint Fisheries Statement and on bycatch limits for sensitive species.
- **OSPAR Quality Status Reports**¹⁴: Indicator assessments relating to the recovery of sensitive fish species can be linked to the delivery of targeted actions.
- **UK Marine Strategy**¹⁵. Progress towards Good Environmental Status (GES) for marine fish and elasmobranch populations will be assessed through UK Marine Strategy monitoring and reporting cycles, providing a broader measure of the effectiveness of conservation actions.

Funding

Funding is essential to deliver actions under the Conservation Measures and Mitigation Theme. Current opportunities to support elasmobranch-related work are available through the Department's **Environment Fund**¹⁶ and the **Marine, Environment and Fisheries Fund (MEFF)**¹⁷, including research on avoidance behaviour and fishing gear modifications to reduce bycatch risk. To support delivery of recently published nature recovery action plans, MEFF Scheme 3 – Environment and Conservation Action was updated in 2026 to extend support beyond blue carbon projects, which have received funding in recent years, to include the Seabird and Elasmobranch Conservation Strategies.

Work packages under the PEACPLUS project MOSAIC, which commenced in 2025¹⁸, have proposed actions to target elasmobranch populations, at both species and population level which will contribute to the Strategy's Actions. Furthermore, MNROG will have a role in identifying other funding opportunities that may be relevant.

¹³ [Fisheries Act 2020](#)

¹⁴ [OSPAR Quality Status Reports](#)

¹⁵ [UK Marine Strategy](#)

¹⁶ [DAERA Environment Fund](#)

¹⁷ [DAERA Marine Environment and Fisheries Fund \(MEFF\)](#)

¹⁸ [SEUPB PEACE PLUS projects](#)

Conclusion

Northern Ireland waters are recognised as being geographically important for a range of elasmobranch species. Our waters support ecologically important habitats, are essential throughout key elasmobranch life-history stages, and contribute to marine ecosystem function and resilience, such as acting as migratory corridors for many species, or localised nursery areas. As demands on the marine environment continue to grow for food production, renewable energy, transport and recreation, it is essential that these activities are managed sustainably and in a way that safeguards marine biodiversity. While elasmobranchs have historically been affected by a range of anthropogenic pressures, this Strategy provides a framework for improving our understanding, management and conservation of these species. Through the delivery of this Strategy, we aspire to see elasmobranch populations in Northern Ireland's waters recovering and resilient, supported by effective management, reduced pressures, and a shared commitment to conserving these iconic species for future generations while enabling the sustainable use of the marine environment.

Annex A: Elasmobranch Conservation Strategy Action Plan

Governance and Strategic Oversight theme

Strategic Action	Action number	Detailed Action	Dependency if relevant (Strategic Action or Action No.)
1. Establish an inclusive governance structure to oversee the implementation of the Action Plan, including the setting of SMART timeframes where possible and undertaking iterative review of the Strategy.	1.1	Within six months of publication, relevant stakeholders to re-establish the Elasmobranch Conservation Working Group and publish terms of reference and governance structure.	N/A
	1.2	Elasmobranch Conservation Working Group to review the Action Plan to detail Lead/Partners, applying SMART timeframes where relevant.	1.1
	1.3	Provide updates on the progress of Action Plan completion to the Marine Nature Recovery Oversight Group and publish annual progress on the Strategy delivery.	1.1

	1.4	Conduct iterative review of the Action Plan and Species list, to contribute to the formal review of the Strategy in 2030 alongside other strategies delivering EIP targets for marine nature recovery.	1.1
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Evidence and Knowledge Base Theme

Strategic Action	Action number	Detailed Action	Dependency if relevant (Strategic Action or Action No.)
2. Establish and maintain robust baselines for the Strategy species and publish current state of Northern Ireland populations.	2.1	Compile, maintain and assess species records to establish population baselines and report on the status of Strategy species in Northern Ireland waters.	N/A
	2.2	Identify and address knowledge gaps in spatial distribution to improve the completeness and reliability of baseline data.	2.1
	2.3	By 2028, analyse abundance trends over time to highlight current trajectory of each species.	2.1 2.2

3. Identify and publish the relevant threats and pressures to elasmobranchs in Northern Ireland waters.	3.1	Map pressures and threats (identified by sensitivity analysis) to highlight where there are spatial overlaps with distribution of the priority elasmobranch species (e.g. VMS data, offshore renewable construction).	2.1
	3.2	By 2028, vulnerability analysis from MarLIN (and other available sources) will be reviewed with key stakeholders and resolved, where missing, for certain species.	2.3 3.1

Conservation Measures and Mitigation Theme

Strategic Action	Action number	Detailed Action	Dependency if relevant (Strategic Action or Action No.)
4. Develop options to strengthen protection for elasmobranchs in Northern Ireland waters.	4.1	Analyse existing mitigation measures (e.g. BatMap, Project ELASMO) and highlight overlap in effectiveness across species.	2.1 2.3 3.1 3.2

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	4.2	Work through domestic and regional forums to identify, adapt and promote the wider implementation of effective mitigation measures.	2.1 2.3 3.1 3.2 4.1
5. Develop, implement and evaluate the effectiveness of mitigation measures to reduce elasmobranch bycatch and entanglement.	5.1	By 2032, evaluate outcomes from previously funded bycatch and entanglement mitigation projects.	2.1 2.3 3.1 3.2 4.1 4.2
6. Increase awareness of the enforcement actions available to the Department and promote collaborative approaches with partners to support compliance and conservation outcomes.	6.1	Develop and deliver targeted communications on: • relevant legislation • compliance requirements and; • available enforcement actions to support elasmobranch conservation.	N/A
	6.2	Facilitate regular engagement between the Department and partners to identify emerging compliance issues and opportunities for joint action.	N/A

Communications Theme

Strategic Action	Action Number	Detailed Action	Dependency if relevant (Strategic Action or Action No.)
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7. Review, evaluate and enhance current practices for managing wildlife interactions.	7.1	The Elasmobranch Conservation Working Group to review and build upon best practice for wildlife ecotourism by 2028.	N/A
8. Raise awareness of the importance of elasmobranchs in Northern Ireland, fostering engagement, stewardship and shared responsibility for their conservation among all water users.	8.1	Increase national and international public awareness of Northern Ireland's elasmobranchs, their ecological importance and the issues they face through participation of public-facing events linking with elasmobranch conservation.	N/A
	8.2	Through the Elasmobranch Conservation Strategy Working Group, explore the availability of training programmes for areas such as species identification, tagging, for volunteers and professionals to ensure sufficient resources are available.	N/A
	8.3	Develop and deliver a communications campaign, in collaboration with partners, to promote the Strategy and support effective delivery of the Action Plan.	1.1
	8.4	Produce and publish summaries and key findings of relevant actions, as well as visualisations (e.g. pressures maps) in accessible formats to increase awareness and disseminate knowledge.	2 3 4 5 7

Annex B: Wider Strategic and Policy Context

The Strategy delivers actions against several high priority, high-level and interlinked policies and strategies relating to biodiversity and climate change on a global, UK, and Northern Ireland level.

Global

United Nations Sustainable Development Goals

The Sustainable Development Goals¹⁹ (SDGs) are a set of 17 global objectives, adopted by all UN Member States in 2015, aimed at ending poverty, protecting the planet, and ensuring peace and prosperity for all by 2030 through integrated action on health, education, inequality, economic growth, and environmental sustainability. Targets from **Goal 14 - Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development** are particularly relevant to the Elasmobranch Conservation Strategy.

The UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF)

At an international level, the development of the Elasmobranch Conservation Strategy will contribute towards a number of biodiversity targets²⁰ within the GBF, agreed at the CBD 2022, for example:

- **Target 4** Halt Species Extinction, Protect Genetic Diversity, and Manage Human-Wildlife Conflicts.

The Bern Convention

The Council of Europe's Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats (1979) or Bern Convention²¹ is a legally binding international treaty under the Council of Europe, aimed at **conserving wild flora and fauna and their natural habitats** across Europe and parts of Africa. It promotes cooperation among countries and regulates

¹⁹ [Sustainable Development Goals](#)

²⁰ [GBF 2030 Targets \(with Guidance Notes\)](#)

²¹ [Bern Convention](#)

the exploitation of migratory species. **Appendix II** of the Bern Convention includes species that are **strictly protected** (e.g. Basking shark), contracting parties must **prohibit deliberate capture or killing of these species, protect their habitats**, and implement conservation measures. **Appendix III** covers **protected species** whose **exploitation must be regulated**: Porbeagle, Angel shark, White skate.

The OSPAR Convention (Oslo-Paris Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the North-East Atlantic)

OSPAR Convention and its **North-East Atlantic Environment Strategy 2030** commits contracting parties to protecting marine ecosystems and biodiversity, including restoring degraded habitats, safeguarding ecosystem function and enhancing resilience to climate change. **Strategic Objectives 5 and 7²²** are particularly relevant to the Elasmobranch Conservation Strategy; delivery of actions will support **Target S5.06**, which prioritizes improving regional coordination and data sharing for elasmobranchs due to limited knowledge.

United Kingdom

The Marine Strategy Regulations 2010

The **Marine Strategy**²³ requires action to be taken to achieve or maintain Good Environmental Status (GES) in our seas, in a coordinated approach across all four UK Governments, to achieve the UK vision of a clean, healthy, safe, productive and biologically diverse marine environment. The Department has a duty to take a proactive approach to the management of key sensitive species, including elasmobranchs. The following descriptors are of relevance to the Elasmobranch Conservation Strategy;

- **D1 - Biological diversity**
- **D3 - Commercially-exploited fish and shellfish**
- **D4 - Food webs**

²² [Strategy of the OSPAR Commission for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Northeast Atlantic 2030](#)

²³ [The Marine Strategy Regulations 2010](#)

- **D6 - Seafloor integrity**

UK Joint Fisheries Statement (JFS)

The value of both biodiverse ecosystems and sustainable fishing are recognised within the **JFS**²⁴. The JFS sets out the ambition of the UK to continue delivering sustainable management of fisheries, recognising that a healthy and resilient marine environment is the foundation for a prosperous seafood sector and thriving coastal communities. The JFS also recognises the importance of reducing bycatch and minimising catches of sensitive species such as elasmobranchs through its sustainability, ecosystem, and bycatch objectives.

Bycatch Mitigation Initiative

The Bycatch Mitigation Initiative²⁵ is a Defra coordinated approach which builds on existing programmes such as Clean Catch UK and the UK Bycatch Monitoring Programme, and which DAERA feeds into. The Strategy aligns with the objectives under this initiative, working to improve the understanding of bycatch and entanglement of sensitive marine species through monitoring and scientific research, identifying key threats and developing/adopting effective measures to minimise and, where possible, eliminate bycatch and entanglement of sensitive marine species.

Northern Ireland

Draft Marine Plan for Northern Ireland

The draft Marine Plan for Northern Ireland²⁶ is being developed within the framework of the UK Marine Policy Statement to facilitate the sustainable development of the marine area. It has a number of objectives which align with the Elasmobranch Conservation Strategy, they involve moving towards healthy, resilient and adaptable marine ecosystems and promoting the marine resource, its recreational value and its wider economic, environmental and social benefits to all.

²⁴ [Joint Fisheries Statement](#)

²⁵ [Marine Bycatch Mitigation Initiative](#)

²⁶ [Marine Plan for NI](#)

Environmental Improvement Plan for Northern Ireland (EIP)

Legislative provisions contained within the Environment Act 2021²⁷ place a statutory duty on the Department to publish an Environmental Improvement Plan for Northern Ireland²⁸ (EIP) as a delivery mechanism for the Green Growth Strategy²⁹. The EIP forms the basis for a coherent and effective set of interventions that can deliver real improvements in the quality of the environment and thereby improve the health and well-being of all who live and work here.

The development of the Elasmobranch Conservation Strategy aligns with the EIP Strategic Environmental Outcome Three “Thriving, resilient and connected nature and wildlife” under the theme “Protecting Nature at Sea”. Specifically, this met the target to develop and consult on an elasmobranch strategy for NI by 2024.

MPA Strategy for the Northern Ireland Inshore Region 2024-2030

The MPA Strategy³⁰ outlines a roadmap for the protection, management and restoration of the NI inshore MPA network through to 2030. It will see the network deliver real benefits to the features which it is designated to protect, as well as benefits in the wider marine area. Though there are currently no MPAs designated specifically for protection of elasmobranchs, well managed MPAs deliver benefits to marine organisms that use these spaces, and may be important for providing spaces to forage, breed, or as nurseries or shelter.

²⁷ [The Environment Act 2021](#)

²⁸ [Environmental Improvement Plan for NI](#)

²⁹ [Green Growth Strategy](#)

³⁰ [Marine Protected Areas Strategy for the Northern Ireland Inshore Region 2025-2030 | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs](#)

Annex C: Monitoring, Data Collection and Tagging Programmes

DAERA currently carry out a range of methods for monitoring elasmobranch populations in Northern Ireland, in addition to statutory monitoring of marine habitats and species³¹. This is in combination with survey efforts from a range of stakeholders including the Agri-Food Biosciences Institute (AFBI), environmental Non-Governmental Organisations (eNGOs), academia and members of the public through volunteer angling. The list below highlights the most common methods adopted for elasmobranch monitoring in Northern Ireland:

- Towed Spy-ball camera
- Baited Remote Underwater Video (BRUV)
- Angling surveys
- Egg case survey
- Bycatch monitoring.
- Scientific trawl e.g., groundfish survey

The DAERA Elasmobranch Tagging Programme builds on the Ulster Wildlife-led Sea Deep Project by working closely with recreational anglers to deploy different types of tag (floy, satellite and acoustic) to assess movements, habitat association and migration patterns of elasmobranch species. For the tagging of Angel shark, Common (Flapper) skate and Basking shark, a licence under the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 (as amended) is required. Further information on the programme, the code of best practice for handling elasmobranchs during recreational angling activities and submitting catch records can be found [here](#).

Knowledge gaps

To better understand the current distribution and habitat use of elasmobranchs in Northern Ireland, the following knowledge gaps have been identified as priority for this strategy to address:

- Nursery areas
- Migratory channel(s)
- Site fidelity/ areas of residency

³¹ [DAERA Monitoring marine habitat and species](#)

- Local distribution of species covered in this Strategy (Table 1)
- Local genetic reference datasets
- Effective bycatch mitigation measures

Our understanding of elasmobranch populations has changed over time, meaning contemporary datasets may not fully reflect historical trends in species abundance or distribution; a phenomenon often referred to as **Shifting Baseline Syndrome**³². It is therefore important to recognise the limitations of the available evidence and to be transparent about both data sources and the confidence associated with analyses.

The Department will, where possible, seek to standardise datasets to support the identification of conservation priorities across species. However, given the diversity of data sources, not all datasets are directly comparable. In such cases, all available evidence will be considered to ensure that potentially valuable information is not lost and can still inform management decisions. Where data is lacking or incomplete, the Precautionary Principle will be applied to guide effective conservation action.

The 2009 NIEA *Position Statement on Sharks, Skates and Rays in Northern Ireland Waters*³³, produced by AFBI, provides a robust species-specific assessment of elasmobranch abundance and distribution and represents the best available baseline for Northern Ireland. This evidence base will be built upon to address key knowledge gaps, particularly in relation to the spatial movements of highly mobile species. Additional data collection methods including satellite tracking and the installation of acoustic receiver arrays to detect tagged individuals will further strengthen this evidence base.

Important Shark and Ray Areas (ISRAs) in Northern Ireland

The ISRA Project is led by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Shark Specialist group and represents a partnership of individuals, institutions and organisations across the world, working together to identify and map areas of importance for elasmobranchs at different life history stages. The Antrim Coast has been identified as an

³² [Shifting baseline syndrome: causes, consequences, and implications.](#)

³³ [Position statement on sharks, skates and rays in Northern Ireland](#)

Important Shark, Skate and Ray Area³⁴. In addition to meeting the qualifying criteria for Spiny dogfish (Spurdog, *Squalus acanthias*), there are additional indications that this area is important for reproduction of Blackmouth Catshark and aggregations of Flapper Skate.

³⁴ [Antrim Coast ISRA - Important Shark Ray Areas](#)

Annex D: Conservation Status

The following 12 elasmobranch species in Northern Ireland coastal waters have been selected for inclusion, with eight listed in Annex V of OSPAR regulations (OSPAR Agreement 2008-06)³⁵, and most listed as Critically Endangered to Near Threatened by the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature)³⁶.

Species	Northern Ireland Priority Species List (2022)*	OSPAR Status Assessment (2021) ³⁷	IUCN Red List	
			EU assessment (2017)	Global assessment (2018)
Angel shark (<i>Squatina squatina</i>)	1,2,3	Poor	Critically Endangered, Decreasing	Critically Endangered, Decreasing
Basking shark (<i>Cetorhinus maximus</i>)	1,2	Poor	Endangered, Stable	Endangered, Decreasing
Porbeagle (<i>Lamna nasus</i>)	1,2	Unknown	Critically Endangered, Decreasing	Vulnerable, Decreasing
Spurdog (<i>Squalus acanthias</i>)	1,2	Poor	Endangered, Decreasing	Vulnerable, Decreasing
Tope (<i>Galeorhinus galeus</i>)	1,2	Not applicable ³⁸	Vulnerable, Decreasing	Critically Endangered, Decreasing

³⁵ [Overview Assessment of Implementation of OSPAR Recommendations](#)

³⁶ [IUCN Red List of Threatened Species](#)

³⁷ [OSPAR Threatened and Declining Fish](#)

³⁸ Tope is listed on Appendix II of the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals

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Flapper skate (<i>Dipturus intermedius</i>)	1,2,4	Poor (Listed under Common skate)	Critically Endangered	Critically Endangered, Decreasing
White skate (<i>Rostroraja alba</i>)	1,2,3	Poor	Critically Endangered, Decreasing	Endangered, Decreasing
Blonde ray (<i>Raja brachyura</i>)	2	Not applicable	Near Threatened, Decreasing	Near Threatened, Decreasing
Cuckoo ray (<i>Leucoraja naevus</i>)	1,2	Not applicable	Least Concern, Unknown (2015)	Near Threatened, Decreasing
Undulate ray (<i>Raja undulata</i>)	1,2	Not applicable	Near Threatened, Unknown	Near Threatened, Decreasing
Spotted ray (<i>Raja montagui</i>)	1,2	Not assessed/unknown	Least Concern, Stable	Least Concern, Increasing
Thornback ray (<i>Raja clavata</i>)	1,2	Good	Near Threatened, Stable	Near Threatened, Decreasing

*Northern Ireland Priority Species criteria

- 1 – Internationally Listed Species.
- 2 – Decline based on available data and expert judgement.
- 3 – Rare or restricted range - rare breeding species confined to 5 hectares.
- 4 – NI stronghold or endemic – both stronghold range/population and designation as “endemic” subject to expert judgement.

Annex E: Best Practice Recommendations

There are accepted best practice recommendations for the protection of elasmobranchs in relation to different pressures.

Recreational fishing / angling

Handling - good handling improves long-term survival of these species and therefore can contribute to population recovery. This is particularly important for juvenile elasmobranchs. Where possible keep the animal in the water. If there is a need to lift or move the animal, a sling or mat should be used and avoid holding near the gills. Hold or lift under the mid-body and base of tail and never drag backwards. Use soft surfaces or keep the animal in water when removing fishing gear. Return to the water as quickly as possible.

Gear - use barbless hooks for easier removal and reduced injury. Match gear to target species and use strong lines to prevent breakage and reduce entanglement risk.

Commercial fishing

Bycatch – fishing should be avoided in those areas previously identified and reported as having high incidents of bycatch. The locations of these areas should be shared with other fishers. Report all elasmobranch bycatch (whether a Strategy Species or not) to the Department through marine.wildlife@daera-ni.gov.uk, including location, species (if known), estimate of number/ abundance, condition (alive/dead). Also submit photos where possible.

An innovative By-catch Avoidance Tool map (BatMap³⁹) is being pioneered by skippers fishing the in west coast of Scotland. The project represents a collaborative approach to problem solving between industry and scientists that could be adopted in Northern Ireland if proven to be successful in reducing bycatch.

Recreational water use

While most of the species listed in the Strategy are demersal, some species such as Basking shark can be found near the surface where they may be susceptible to surface strike and disturbance. Watercraft users should be aware that breaching by Basking shark can occur, and if too close, can pose a danger to both the animal and the watercraft. Effort should be

³⁹ [BATmap](#)

made to avoid crossing paths so as to allow animals to continue on their course without having to dive or change direction.

Personal watercraft users, non-motorised paddle craft users (canoes/kayaks/paddleboards) and people sea swimming or diving should all exercise caution around elasmobranch species. It is advised to maintain a safe distance and speed. Swimmers should remain at least 4m from Basking sharks, while personal watercraft should keep a minimum distance of 100m. Travel speed of personal watercraft should remain below six knots, and it is advised to switch engines to neutral if an animal approaches (particularly for Basking sharks). Water users should stay within a small group and maintain steady, constant and predictable movements.

The [Marine Wildlife Disturbance Guidance Documents](#) outline best practice advice on recreational interactions with Basking shark as well as other marine wildlife.

Annex F: Glossary

Acoustic telemetry – a method for tracking the movements and habitat use of animals using electronic tags that emit uniquely coded set of ‘pings’, recorded by receivers or listening stations within a known detection range.

Adaptive management – an approach to natural resource management that aims to reduce social and ecological costs through a process of ‘learning by doing’.

Anthropogenic – effects, processes, objects, or materials are those that are derived from human activities.

Biennial – occurs every 2 years.

Baited Remote Under Water Video (BRUV) – these stationary, seafloor camera stations use bait to attract fish in their vicinity, recording the species attracted to the bait or swimming past the camera lens.

Bycatch – Fishers sometimes catch and discard animals they do not want, cannot sell, or are not allowed to keep. This is collectively known as ‘bycatch.’

Demersal – part of the water column near to the seabed, not to be confused with ‘benthic’ which refers to bottom of a body of water i.e. seabed.

Elasmobranchs – The collective term for sharks, skates and rays, which are cartilaginous fishes.

Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP) for Northern Ireland – Northern Ireland’s first Environmental Improvement Plan, published in September 2024, forms the basis for a coherent and effective set of interventions that collectively can deliver real improvements in the quality of the environment. The preparation and publication of an EIP is a statutory duty placed upon the Department by Schedule 2 of the Environment Act 2021, which came into force in July 2022. Further details and links can be found on the DAERA website [here](#).

Fecundity – the ability to produce an abundance of offspring or new growth.

Food web – consists of all the food chains in a single ecosystem.

Good Environmental Status (GES) – the environmental status of marine waters where these provide ecologically diverse and dynamic oceans and seas which are clean, healthy and productive.

Life history traits – a species' life history is the pattern of life cycle processes, including growth, development, reproduction, and death. Life history traits, therefore, are traits that relate to the timing and occurrence of each of these stages.

Marine Conservation Zones (MCZ) – used to refer to MCZs designated under section 13 of the Marine Act (Northern Ireland) 2013 in the Northern Ireland inshore region and under section 116 of the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009 in the Northern Ireland offshore region. MCZs are designated to safeguard vulnerable or unique marine species and habitats of national importance.

Marine and Environment Fisheries Fund (MEFF) – designed to support marine and fisheries activity and help deliver against the aims and objectives within the Joint Fisheries Statement and the Northern Ireland Executive's commitments to Green Growth and Net-zero. Further details can be found [here](#).

Mitigation measures – actions or recommendations put in place to reduce or avoid a pressure.

Northern Ireland Priority Species (NIPS) – priority species, as listed under the Wildlife and Natural Environment Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, which require conservation action because of their decline, rarity and/or importance in an all-Ireland and UK context.

OSPAR – refers to the Oslo-Paris Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the North-East Atlantic. It is an agreement by relevant governments and the European Community to co-operate to protect the marine environment of the North-East Atlantic.

Oviparous – reproductive method by means of producing eggs which are hatched after they have been laid by the parent.

PEACEPLUS – is a cross-border funding Programme supported by the European Union, the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the Government of Ireland, and the Northern Ireland administration. The Programme is designed to support peace and prosperity across Northern Ireland and the border counties of Ireland, building upon the work of the previous PEACE and INTERREG Programmes.

Population (genetic) – a group of interbreeding organisms of the same species that share a common gene pool within a defined geographic area.

Population (regional) – a group of individuals living within a defined geographic area or region.

Satellite telemetry – allows researchers to track the movement of an animal by using orbiting satellites that detect signals emitted from a transmitter attached to the animal.

Site fidelity – is the tendency to return to previously visited locations.

TAC – Total Allowable Catch, this is the annual quota of a fish stock that is allowed to be caught in commercial fisheries.

Environment Fund – is money raised by the carrier bag levy which is administered by DAERA to support projects which will help deliver key environmental outcomes across Northern Ireland.

UK Marine Strategy – This strategy provides an updated assessment of our seas and sets objectives, targets, and indicators for achieving Good Environmental Status.

UNCLOS – The 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) was a landmark convention setting out rules relating to the world's oceans and seas. The

convention covers issues including territorial limits, resources and protection of the marine environment.

WiSe – The WiSe Scheme provides wildlife sensitivity training and accreditation for boating and adventure sport professionals, as well as best practice advice for the wider public.

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