



## NOAA FISHERIES

Southeast  
Regional Office

### Endangered Species Act Listing

NOAA Fisheries listed the U.S. distinct population segment of smalltooth sawfish as endangered under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) on April 1, 2003.

The endangered status was reached because the population was at risk of extinction due to its limited size and the effects of ongoing threats.

### Critical Habitat Designation

NOAA Fisheries designated critical habitat for smalltooth sawfish on September 2, 2009.



Red mangroves are essential for juvenile smalltooth sawfish survival.

# The Endangered Smalltooth Sawfish (*Pristis pectinata*)



### What is a sawfish?

Like sharks and rays, sawfish are elasmobranchs with a skeleton made of cartilage instead of bone. Although their bodies appear shark-like, sawfish are rays as their mouths and gills are located on the bottom of their bodies. Sawfish are named for their saw-like snouts (rostra) that are used for feeding and defense. The size and number of teeth on the rostrum varies by species. There are 5 species of sawfishes worldwide but only the smalltooth sawfish is currently found in U.S. waters. The smalltooth sawfish is distinguished by the 22 to 29 teeth located on each side of the rostrum and the lack of a bottom lobe on the caudal (tail) fin.

### The Decline of Smalltooth Sawfish in the U.S.:

Smalltooth sawfish were historically found in coastal waters from Texas to New York but the species is now only found with any regularity in Florida. Researchers believe the decline in this population was the result of overfishing (bycatch mortality), habitat loss, and the prolonged rate of reproduction for this species. While there are no conclusive population estimates, it is believed that the population is currently only a small fraction of its historic size. The last remaining stronghold for the population is found between Charlotte Harbor and the Florida Keys, including Everglades National Park.

### Biology:

- Mothers give live birth every other year
- Gestation period ~ 12 months
- Brood size ~ 7-14 young
- Size at birth ~ 2 feet
- Size at maturity ~ 11 feet for males, ~ 12 feet for females
- Age at maturity ~ 7-11 years
- Maximum size ~ 16 feet
- Maximum age – unknown (likely several decades)
- Diet – mostly fish but also crustaceans (shrimp and crabs)

## Role of NOAA Fisheries in Conservation and Recovery

### Recovery Planning

NOAA formed a multi-agency team which developed and now implements a recovery plan. The plan serves as a guide for sawfish recovery by prioritizing research and framing management decisions.

### Collaboration with Federal Agencies

The ESA instructs federal agencies to use their authorities to promote conservation and requires them to assess whether any action they authorize, fund, or carry out has the potential to affect protected species. If any project has the potential to affect smalltooth sawfish or its critical habitat, federal agencies must consult with NOAA. Through this collaborative process, NOAA works to reduce or eliminate negative effects to smalltooth sawfish.

### Outreach and Education

NOAA and its partners are engaged in ongoing efforts to minimize injury and mortality of sawfish from human interaction. These efforts include working with the commercial fishing industry and raising awareness in the recreational fishing community. NOAA has developed a variety of outreach products encouraging safe handling and quick release of caught sawfish, and reporting of any sawfish catches or sightings.

### Research

NOAA supports and participates in a number of research projects. These projects provide vital information on habitat needs, population abundance, and the response of sawfish to recovery actions. Data collected from these projects are used to monitor the status of the population and make management and recovery decisions.

### Habitat:

Smalltooth sawfish use different habitats at different times of life. Juveniles use shallow estuarine waters typically fringed with red mangroves. The shallow depths (<3 ft) and structure of the red mangrove prop roots provide refuge from larger predators and an abundant source of prey. The smallest sawfish are restricted to these shallow water habitats but as they increase in size they travel farther and into deeper waters. Adults can be found in coastal environments outside of the estuaries to depths of 600 feet.

### Critical Habitat

In 2009, NOAA Fisheries designated critical habitat to facilitate the recruitment of juveniles into the adult population. There are 2 designated units of critical habitat, Charlotte Harbor Estuary Unit and the Ten Thousand Islands/Everglades Unit. The 2 habitat features that are essential to the conservation of the species are red mangrove shorelines and shallow, euryhaline (wide-ranging salinity) waters characterized by depths less than 3 feet measured at mean lower low water.



### Ongoing Threats to Smalltooth Sawfish:

There are several threats that continue to impact the U.S. population of smalltooth sawfish. The most notable threats are habitat loss associated with coastal development and bycatch mortality in various fisheries. These threats combined with the species' generally prolonged life history strategy will extend the period of time needed to recover this population.

### How Can You Help?

#### If you see a sawfish:

- Report sightings to 1-844-4SAWFISH

#### If you catch a sawfish:

- Keep it in the water – **DO NOT** bring it aboard or drag it ashore
- **DO NOT** use gaffs or ropes to secure
- Cut the line as close to the hook as is safely possible
- Report your catch for science to 1-844-4SAWFISH
- **Sawfish are protected by federal and state law**
  - **DO NOT** try handling sawfish as this could result in injury
  - **DO NOT** remove sawfish from the water or attempt to drag ashore
  - **DO NOT** remove the rostrum as this leads to death

#### If you see unlawful sawfish harvest or handling:

- Report to 1-844-4SAWFISH or to law enforcement at 1-800-853-1964

### For More Information about Sawfish Conservation:

Visit: [http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov/protected\\_resources/sawfish/](http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov/protected_resources/sawfish/)

Contact: **Adam Brame, Sawfish Recovery Coordinator** at: [adam.brame@noaa.gov](mailto:adam.brame@noaa.gov)

