
Great white sharks on way to endangered

By Peter Fimrite / February 06, 2013

The biggest, scariest, most ferocious predators in the sea were selected Wednesday as candidates for protection under California's Endangered Species Act.

The state Fish and Game Commission unanimously agreed to begin a yearlong review of great white sharks to determine whether they are sufficiently threatened to warrant a listing, which would impose more stringent regulations on activities that might harm the beasts, including fishing.

"California's most feared and revered ocean predators are one step closer to protections they desperately need," said Geoff Shester, the California program director for Oceana, one of three conservation groups that filed a petition to protect the sharks. "Now we can start talking about how to end the continued killing of white shark pups as bycatch in our damaging offshore gillnet fisheries."

The petition, filed last August by Oceana, the Center for Biological Diversity and Shark Stewards, seeks special protection for what is now known as the Northeastern Pacific population of the toothy predators, which includes sharks that lurk off the coast of San Francisco.

A landmark study released in 2009 by Stanford University determined that this region's white sharks are genetically unique compared with other great whites around the world. They are known to congregate in the fall and winter off Guadalupe Island, in Mexico, and in an area between Monterey Bay, the Farallon Islands and Bodega Head - a food-rich coastal region known to shark watchers as the Red Triangle.

The finned carnivores also take occasional excursions under the Golden Gate Bridge into San Francisco Bay, according to electronic monitoring of tagged sharks.

Only 339 adult and sub-adult sharks were recently counted in the two locations, but the numbers are preliminary and don't include the many juvenile sharks that are born and grow up in Southern California.

Besides getting a better count and determining the extent of the perils sharks face, the state will try over the next year to quantify historic populations and determine what regulations would be needed to protect them.

Great white sharks, known scientifically as *Carcharodon carcharias*, average 15 to 16 feet in length but can grow to 20 feet. The biggest one on record, caught in 1939, was 21 feet long and weighed 7,300 pounds.

The conservation groups have also petitioned the National Marine Fisheries Service to list great whites under the federal Endangered Species Act. A decision on that request is expected in June 2013.