

Press Release:

INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION ACHIEVES MILESTONE FOR SHARK CONSERVATION IN IRELAND AS LEGAL PROTECTION IS AFFORDED TO ENDANGERED BASKING SHARK

International collaboration between United States, United Kingdom and Irish researchers was key to [achieving a 15-year conservation goal](#) for a globally endangered species. Growing up to 12m and weighing up to 4 tonnes, the basking shark is the largest fish in Irish waters. Today, the Irish Minister for Heritage and Electoral Reform Malcolm Noonan, alongside Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine Charlie McConalogue, added the basking shark to the list of protected species under Section 23 of the Wildlife Act. Basking sharks now enjoy legal protection in Irish waters from hunting (unless under permission or license), injury and willful destruction of their breeding and resting places. This landmark decision protects the shark and its habitat in one of the most globally important areas for this endangered species.

This legislation was heavily supported by the Irish Basking Shark Group (IBSG: <https://www.baskingshark.ie/>), an international network of researchers, educators, and community representatives. An original goal of this organization, when founded in 2009, was to achieve conservation success for basking sharks in Ireland using engagement, advocacy, and research. To this end, the group has grown in the last decade to include representatives from Ireland, the U.K., and the United States. In addition to supporting the new legislation via its research and education efforts, the IBSG served as a critical link between the public, government and researchers worldwide during efforts to create this policy. In 2021, the group organized an international consortium of scientists and conservation organizations to sign an open letter to the Irish government, calling for legal protection of basking sharks in Ireland. Simultaneously, the IBSG also ran a [“Save Our Sharks” campaign](#), resulting in 12,000 members of the Irish public signing an online petition in support of this new policy.

United States representatives Dr. Alexandra McInturf (Co-Coordinator of the IBSG, Oregon State University) and Chelsea Gray (Researcher with the IBSG, George Mason University) have been working alongside their Irish and UK partners to conduct vital research for basking shark conservation. Along with their research efforts, they have made strong efforts to communicate this research to key government officials, allowing it to shape Irish conservation policy for an iconic, endangered species.

“This is a great example of the importance of diversifying research methods and collaborating with as many people as possible,” says Gray, whose [research on social attitudes](#) helped demonstrate strong public support for basking shark conservation, reassuring lawmakers that there would be no backlash to the amendment.

McInturf has been conducting field studies on basking sharks in Ireland and [recently published a study](#) on the basking shark population along the U.S. West Coast. In addition to her work with the IBSG, she also sits on the scientific steering committee for the [SeaMonitor Project](#), an international research initiative designed to study basking sharks and other marine species as they move throughout this region. McInturf believes that such international collaboration is critical to ensuring the persistence of this species

worldwide. “Basking sharks are highly mobile, capable of moving across entire ocean basins. In doing so, they pass through the jurisdiction of many different countries. Yet it is estimated that Irish waters host in the range of 10-20% of the global population of this shark species year-round. Their presence in Ireland also appears relatively steady, at least compared to some other regions where sightings numbers have decreased dramatically. This suggests that Ireland offers important habitat for the species. The news today, that Minister Noonan has conferred legal protection on basking sharks, is encouraging for the conservation of basking sharks, which were classified as globally Endangered on the IUCN Red List of threatened species as recently as 2019.”

As a result of the group's efforts, Irish waters are now internationally known as providing globally important habitat for the basking shark. Large numbers of these sharks are encountered feeding along the Irish coasts during summer and, more recently noted, courting during autumn months.

The recognition of basking sharks as ‘wildlife’ today is significant because for the first time it opens the door for critically endangered shark species in Ireland to benefit from conservation legislation. Sharks play crucial roles in the marine and coastal ecosystems that humans are reliant on for their livelihoods and food security. The International Union for Conservation of Nature’s Red List highlights that one third of all known species of sharks and their relatives are considered threatened with extinction. Ireland, as an island nation, is host to many such species with several listed as critically endangered or endangered globally.

“This isn’t the end of the IBSG’s campaign to conserve and protect basking sharks in Irish waters, with our thoughts turning next to how best to protect these animals in Ireland’s expanding Marine Protected Area network. But, their legal protection is a huge cause for celebration,” says Dr. Donal Griffin, co-coordinator of the IBSG.

As far as continued international involvement, McInturf plans to continue her work in Ireland and with the IBSG for the foreseeable future. “It is rare to be able to work so closely at the intersection of research and policy. As part of the group and other research initiatives in Ireland, I have been fortunate to see the impact of science, communication, and education on direct conservation action.”

Similarly, Gray’s current PhD research is on science communication for policy development, with a direct focus on basking shark conservation in Ireland. “The IBSG has provided me the opportunity to take an active role in shark conservation and has shown me the challenge and reward of achieving conservation legislation. This new law is a major step forward in basking shark conservation, but this is only the beginning of a long road to crafting comprehensive, science-based marine policy. I am honored to be part of a group that continues to build key relationships and push for important changes.”

The IBSG would like to thank Minister Noonan, Minister McConalogue, Jennifer Whitmore TD and all our thousands of campaign supporters over the past 18 months who have helped make this happen.

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