

Blue lines indicate the area meeting the ISRA Criteria; dashed lines indicate the suggested buffer for use in the development of appropriate place-based conservation measures

LATAKIA-BANIYAS ISRA

Mediterranean and Black Seas Region

SUMMARY

Latakia-Baniyas lies in the eastern Mediterranean Sea and covers ~50 km of the coastline of Syria. The seafloor in this area encompasses very shallow and flat areas, mixed gravel and coarse sand, short stretches of rocky coast, and a steep continental slope extending to deeper waters. This area sits within the North-East Levantine Sea Ecologically or Biologically Significant Marine Area. Within this area there are: **threatened species** (e.g., Blackchin Guitarfish *Glaucostegus cemiculus*) and **reproductive areas** (e.g., Spiny Butterfly Ray *Gymnura altavela*).

CRITERIA

Criterion A - Vulnerability; Sub-criterion C1 - Reproductive Areas

— SYRIA —

— 0-1,020 metres —

— 1,192.6 km² —





DESCRIPTION OF HABITAT

Latakia-Baniyas extends along the Syrian coastline of Latakia in the north, to the coast of Baniyas in the south, stretching for ~50 km of coastline. South of Latakia is a long stretch of sandy beach, with dunes, extending almost to Jeble. The area is characterised by a very shallow and flat seafloor. Around Jeble, the coast is mixed gravel and coarse sand, changing to sand immediately below the waterline, and the seabed is relatively flat. This type of coastline continues down to Baniyas, where there is a short stretch of rocky coast. Here, there is a sharp transition from rock to sand a few metres below the sea surface, resulting in a flat seabed up to ~1 km from the coast. Further seawards the seafloor descends sharply at a slope of 10%. Further south, past the rocky outcrops of Baniyas, the coast is again mainly sand to fine gravel, and the seafloor is sandy and flat.

Sea currents in the Levantine Basin off Syria are generally of low intensity (less than 0.2 m/sec). The predominant direction is anticlockwise from south to north, but in some months of the year gyres can form with a resultant northward current adjacent to the coast (Saad 1996). Strong intensity surface currents are present only when induced by wind forces and can reach peaks of over 1 m/sec on such occasions. Such currents are confined to the upper surface layers.

This area sits within the North-East Levantine Sea Ecologically or Biologically Significant Marine Area (CBD 2023).

This Important Shark and Ray Area is benthopelagic and is delineated from inshore and surface waters (0 m) to 1,020 m based on the depth range occupied by the Qualifying Species in the area.

ISRA CRITERIA

CRITERION A – VULNERABILITY

Three Qualifying Species considered threatened with extinction according to the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species™ regularly occur in the area. These are the Critically Endangered Blackchin Guitarfish (Kyne & Jabado 2019), and the Endangered Common Smoothhound (Jabado et al. 2021) and Spiny Butterfly Ray (Dulvy et al. 2021).

SUB-CRITERION C1 – REPRODUCTIVE AREAS

Latakia-Baniyas is an important reproductive area for one shark and three ray species.

Data were collected daily between November 2014 and October 2016 from landing site surveys and interviews with fishers capturing sharks and rays. Interviews with fishers gathered information on gear and fishing locations (Alkusairy 2019).

High numbers of juvenile Common Smoothhounds are found year-round in Syrian waters (Alkusairy 2019), with maturity determined based on total length (TL; maturity for males and females is 70-112 and 107-124 cm TL, respectively [Jabado et al. 2021]). A total of 37 pregnant females (with developed embryos) were recorded between August and December, with the size of the largest developed embryo 36.1 cm TL (Alkusairy 2019). Size-at-birth is 24-45 cm TL (Jabado et al. 2021). Areas considered to be potential nursery grounds for this species are located between Jablah and Baniyas (Alkusairy & Saad 2018).

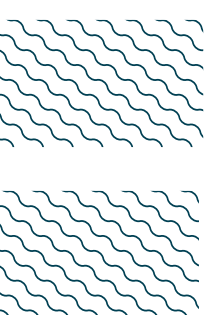
Landings of 3,303 Blackchin Guitarfish were recorded in Syrian waters between 2014-2016 (Alkusairy 2019), with immature animals recorded throughout the year suggesting a resident population in Syria.

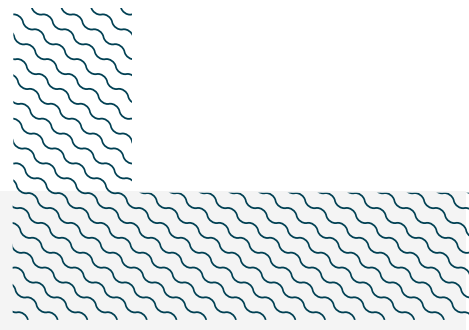


Pregnant Blackchin Guitarfish are reported from April to July, with average developed embryo sizes of 32.1 cm TL (Ali 2009). Of 102 specimens examined, there were nine pregnant females with developed embryos. The peak of neonates and young-of-the-year for this species (36–75 cm TL) are recorded in the winter, with the smallest free-swimming individuals similar in size to developed foetuses (Alkusaairy 2019). Reproductive areas for this species (where the majority of neonates were recorded) were identified south of Latakia city to the area between Jablah and Baniyas cities, north of Tartous city, and south of Tartous city.

A total of 114 Spiny Butterfly Rays were collected during trawl and benthic longline surveys between 2010–2013 off the Syrian coast, between Raas Albassit and Tartous at depths ranging from 5–60 m (Alkusaairy et al. 2014). An analysis of the reproductive biology of the Spiny Butterfly Ray demonstrated that a sustained population is established in the area, and the presence of near-term embryos suggests that these waters may be used as reproductive areas (Alkusaairy 2019). In total, 19 eggs and 41 embryos were examined: the developing embryos exhibited an umbilical cord and an external yolk sac, whereas in the fully developed embryos, the yolk sac was reabsorbed and a scar marked the location of the umbilical cord (Alkusaairy et al. 2014). Overall, 16 individuals measuring 35–59 cm DW were recorded between November and January suggesting they are neonates and young-of-the-year (Alkusaairy et al. 2014). Size-at-birth for this species is estimated at 38–44 cm DW (Last et al. 2016). A total of 1,329 individuals were recorded from landings between 2016–2018 (Alkusaairy 2019). Approximately 50% of landings were considered immature and 7% of animals considered neonates (Alkusaairy 2019). All samples of Spiny Butterfly Ray with near-term embryos were collected between the cities of Latakia and northern Baniyas (Alkusaairy 2019).

Specimens of Thornback Skates collected between 2013–2014 (n = 193) indicated a resident population in Syrian waters (Saad et al. 2018). A total of 2,622 Thornback Skates were also landed from fisheries operating off the Syrian coast between 2014–2016 (Alkusaairy 2019). Overall, 80% of these landings were of immature animals and were present year-round. Size-at-birth for this species is reported at 10–13 cm DW (Last et al. 2016). The peak of Thornback Skate neonates was recorded in spring (14–30 cm DW) (Alkusaairy 2019), and reproductive areas were indicated between southern Raas Albassit and Tartous.





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QUALIFYING SPECIES

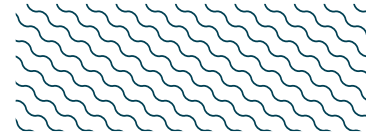
| Scientific Name | Common Name | IUCN Red List Category | Global Depth Range (m) | ISRA Criteria/Sub-criteria Met | | | | | | | |
|-------------------------------|----------------------|------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------------|---|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| | | | | A | B | C1 | C2 | C3 | C4 | C5 | D1 |
| SHARKS | | | | | | | | | | | |
| <i>Mustelus mustelus</i> | Common Smoothhound | EN | 5-800 | X | | X | | | | | |
| RAYs | | | | | | | | | | | |
| <i>Glaucostegus cemiculus</i> | Blackchin Guitarfish | CR | 0-100 | X | | X | | | | | |
| <i>Gymnura altavela</i> | Spiny Butterfly Ray | EN | 10-150 | X | | X | | | | | |
| <i>Raja clavata</i> | Thornback Skate | NT | 0-1,020 | | | X | | | | | |



SUPPORTING SPECIES

| Scientific Name | Common Name | IUCN Red List Category |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------|
| SHARKS | | |
| <i>Alopias superciliosus</i> | Bigeye Thresher | VU |
| <i>Carcharhinus obscurus</i> | Dusky Shark | EN |
| <i>Carcharhinus plumbeus</i> | Sandbar Shark | EN |
| <i>Centrophorus uyato</i> | Little Gulper Shark | EN |
| <i>Dalatias licha</i> | Kitefin Shark | VU |
| <i>Galeus melastomus</i> | Blackmouth Catshark | LC |
| <i>Heptranchias perlo</i> | Sharpnose Sevengill Shark | NT |
| <i>Hexanchus griseus</i> | Bluntnose Sixgill Shark | NT |
| <i>Isurus oxyrinchus</i> | Shortfin Mako | EN |
| <i>Oxynotus centrina</i> | Angular Roughshark | EN |
| <i>Scyliorhinus canicula</i> | Smallspotted Catshark | LC |
| <i>Squalus blainville</i> | Longnose Spurdog | DD |
| <i>Squatina aculeata</i> | Sawback Angelshark | CR |
| <i>Squatina oculata</i> | Smoothback Angelshark | CR |
| RAYS | | |
| <i>Aetomylaeus bovinus</i> | Duckbill Eagle Ray | CR |
| <i>Dasyatis pastinaca</i> | Common Stingray | VU |
| <i>Dasyatis tortonesei</i> | Tortonese's Stingray | DD |
| <i>Dipturus oxyrinchus</i> | Longnosed Skate | NT |
| <i>Mobula mobular</i> | Spinetail Devil Ray | EN |
| <i>Pteroplatytrygon violacea</i> | Pelagic Stingray | LC |
| <i>Raja radula</i> | Rough Skate | EN |
| <i>Raja miraletus</i> | Brown Skate | LC |
| <i>Rhinobatos rhinobatos</i> | Common Guitarfish | CR |
| <i>Rhinoptera marginata</i> | Lusitanian Cownose Ray | CR |
| <i>Taeniurops gabatus</i> | Round Fantail Stingray | NT |
| <i>Tetronarce nobiliana</i> | Great Torpedo Ray | LC |
| <i>Torpedo marmorata</i> | Marbled Torpedo Ray | VU |
| CHIMAERAS | | |
| <i>Chimaera monstrosa</i> | Rabbitfish | VU |

IUCN Red List of Threatened Species Categories are available by searching species names at www.iucnredlist.org Abbreviations refer to: CR, Critically Endangered; EN, Endangered; VU, Vulnerable; NT, Near Threatened; LC, Least Concern; DD, Data Deficient.



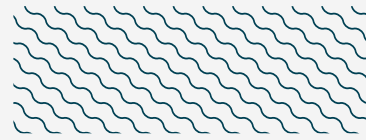
SUPPORTING INFORMATION

There are additional indications that Latakia-Baniyas is an important area for reproductive and movement purposes of one shark and two ray species.

Dusky Shark constituted 19.2% (by weight) of the total landings of sharks and rays in Syrian waters between 2014–2016 (Alkusaairy 2019). Animals landed ($n = 138$) ranged in size between 86–340 cm TL with small sizes primarily landed in late boreal spring and summer. Size-at-birth for this species is reported at 70–100 cm TL (Ebert et al. 2021). Landings were dominated by juveniles measuring <270 cm TL. A number of pregnant females were also recorded in winter with areas off Latakia and south of Baniyas indicated as potentially important reproductive sites for this species due to the presence of pregnant females. Further information is required on the potential importance of the area for Dusky Shark reproduction.

A total of 249 specimens of Longnosed Skate were collected during benthic trawls and longlines at depths between 50–300 m along the Syrian coastline between 2014–2016 (Alkusaairy & Saad 2017). The Longnosed Skate was found year-round in these waters, with evidence of continuous reproduction throughout the year. Of the animals captured, 27.5% were considered young-of-the-year and measured between 34–64 cm disc width (DW) and were captured between Rass Albassit and Tartous (Alkusaairy & Saad 2017). The size-at-birth of this species is estimated at 17 cm DW (Last et al. 2016). Reports from landing surveys between 2016–2018 indicate that 751 animals were landed (Alkusaairy 2019). The peak of Longnosed Skate neonate and juvenile records (69% of landings) were in spring (24–50 cm DW) (Alkusaairy 2019). Further information is required on the potential importance of the area for Longnosed Skate reproduction.

The region off the coast of the Asian mainland, from the Gaza Strip, Palestine to northern Syria, has been identified as a potentially important movement area for the Spinetail Devil Ray. The species undergoes a seasonal migration from the broader region to the southeast corner of the Mediterranean Sea (Notarbartolo di Sciara et al. 2015). This species has been observed frequenting this region since at least the 1970s for a narrow time window from February to April (Abudaya et al. 2017). Sporadic observations along this coast suggest the appearance of the species in March in groups up to 30 individuals (2018, 2020, 2023). Reports of large captures of at least 10 individuals off Lebanon in late winter (Michel Bariche pers. comm. 2023 including video documentation) further corroborate the geographic extent of aggregations in this part of the Mediterranean Sea during this period. There were ~300 specimens of the Spinetail Devil Ray caught by purse seiners off Samandag near the Syrian border in February 2016 (Sakalli 2017), with most animals reportedly released alive. Twelve days later, nine more rays were caught very close to the same location (Sakalli et al. 2016). There is anecdotal evidence that assemblages of the Spinetail Devil Ray also occur further to the west (Antalya) along the south coast of Türkiye in that season (e.g. Başusta & Özbek 2017). Further information is required to determine the importance of this broader region to the life history of the Spinetail Devil Ray.



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