

Hello everybody.

I'm Lionel Yamb, a marine biologist and researcher at the Agricultural Research Institute for Development. I graduated from the Fisheries Science Institute at Douala University where I majored in fishing and managing aquatic ecosystems.

I have a total of five years' experience in marine science in general and in conservation in particular, having worked with local organisations on various conservation research projects targeting aquatic species including marine mammals, elasmobranchii and marine turtles around Cameroon's coast.

My current work focuses on research, education into and conservation of sharks, aiming to produce the baseline reference data for these species off the coast of Cameroon. This data will then be used to guide on-the-ground conservation work.

We already know that sharks are at a higher risk of extinction than most of the planet's other groups of vertebrates. For example, in Cameroon sharks are under threat from both traditional fisherman and the fishing industry.

However, it's still difficult to quantify these threats much more precisely – the data on these animals are still quite limited as there is not currently much shark research being done across the country. It is concentrated in particular pockets in the south.

This is why our work aims to improve the conservation status of sharks in the Northern part of the Cameroon coast. Specifically, we are trying to evaluate their diversity and abundance but also the current threats affecting these creatures in our country.

As important as reliable scientific data on sharks are for their conservation locally, awareness also plays a fundamental role. Therefore, our work also aims to raise local awareness about shark species through education and awareness campaigns.

Why is it so important to be doing this work now? You may not be aware but there is still no legal statute protecting sharks in Cameroon as there is in some other countries. And people here are not yet sufficiently aware of their importance to marine ecosystems. Consequently, sharks face serious threats from overfishing and bycatch.

Our work is contributing not only to raising local awareness of the importance of protecting sharks but to producing important data on the environment and the threats sharks are facing. By extension, it will help assess their conservation status and then improve current legislation on fauna to better manage and protect Cameroon's sharks in the long term.

Most of our current work focuses on the Northern part of the Cameroon coast – from the border with Southern Nigeria in the Gulf of Guinea to the Wouri border up to the Wouri estuary, or at least mine does. In total, it's around 160 km of coastline. We constantly monitor 4 ports to check for shark bycatches in fishing nets. And we are also monitoring markets where certain species are quite frequently sold.

On a visit to the docks, we measured biological parameters and some external meristics and morphometrics that will help in identifying each specimen. We are also looking at fishing vessels. It is important for us to take stock of the vessels involved in fishing to identify the ones that are or could be a threat to sharks in the area.

Last but not least, based on the survey information we have gathered on local perceptions of sharks we are developing tailor-made awareness measures with specifically targeted messages aimed, as I said, at drawing the local communities' attention to the major role sharks play in maintaining the balance in the marine ecosystem they all depend on.

To finish, I'd like to reiterate that these sharks play a key role in marine ecosystem stability and as large predators control the species below them in the food chain. As a result, their decline could have serious impacts on fishing with grave implications for the economy.

The IUCN red list draws our attentions to the many cases where sharks and rays are threatened with extinction. These figures should sound the alarm and act as a wake-up call on the importance of protecting these species. More than that, it should push us into actually taking action.

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