

IN THE BATHROOM WITH ALOPIAS PELAGICUS

Paul R. Foley
prosharks@yahoo.com

EXTENDED ABSTRACT ONLY- DO NOT CITE

No behavioural data are available for the pelagic thresher shark (*Alopias pelagicus*). In 1998, they were found on a seamount, Monad Shoal, in the Cebu Channel, Philippines. Uniquely, they could be seen at a diveable depth (18-25 metres deep) with near 100% reliability for the first three hours after first light, although this has been impacted upon by anthropic factors. They come from the deep to cleaning stations on top of the northern end of the plateau populated by principally by cleaner wrasse (labroides spp.). Butterflyfish, surgeonfish, and other wrasse have also been seen to “clean”; and manta and devil rays are also amongst their clients. All reef shark species appear to have been extirpated.

Given that we see very little of their lives of the threshers, it is a bit like studying humans by watching them in the bathroom. Still this can tell us plenty about cleaning behaviour, interactions, hierarchies, social relationships and groupings, population size and dynamics, influence of external/seasonal factors, and kinematics. Of particular interest is the holding patterns the sharks engage in whilst waiting their turn at a cleaning station, much akin to those used by aeroplanes waiting to land, and the distinct “flight paths” along which they seem to navigate in and out of the deep.

Despite them being broadly homogenous in appearance, a few of them are clearly distinguishable on account of damaged fins, peduncles, trailing fishing line, scars, etc. From these individuals, it can be deduced that the population is at least partially resident and estimates of a population size of several hundred have been arrived at.

Thresher sharks are amongst the many elasmobranch species directly and increasingly targeted. by artisanal fishermen, who are employing novel methods. Furthermore the behavioural ecology of these sharks is threatened by the unregulated interest from recreational divers and professional photographers/film crews. Hence the quality and regularity of the sightings has gone into significant decline.

A sustainable development project has been started to try and maintain the presence of these sharks. It is hoped that by generating revenue for the local community to fund social welfare programs, a value for the living sharks can be realised. Ultimately, the success of all conservation efforts boils down to political will.