

TRACKING THE HOUNDS

Sharkatag – an event where hundreds of anglers help out to tag fish in an effort to support conservation and management



Catching smoothhounds off the Dutch coast is big news



Former UK boat, Valkyrie, was one of 10 local boats chartered for the event



Words and photography by **Dave Lewis**

SMOOTHHOUNDS ARE ABUNDANT off the South Wales coast, but until perhaps 10 years ago they were never caught east of Barry. Nowadays, though, they are caught regularly off Sully Island, and even Penarth beach, and have been caught as far up channel as the Severn Bridges.

The same goes for the southern section of the North Sea, where the species is now caught in large numbers much further north than used to be normal. Numbers are certainly on the increase, which is great news for sea anglers.

Back in 2009, the editor of the Dutch saltwater magazine *Zeehengelsport*, Peter Dohmen, asked if I had some images of smoothhounds he could use to illustrate a news story. At the time, the species was an extremely rare capture off the Dutch coast, yet suddenly these toothless members of the shark family were being caught with such regularity that anglers were setting out to target them. They returned year after year, and in ever-increasing numbers.

Unlike fishing off the UK coast, where sea anglers have a vast selection of species to target, the southern section of the North Sea off the Dutch coastline has very few species. So the possibility of catching a new fish, especially a member of the shark family, was big news.

These new arrivals caught the attention of the Dutch sport fishing organisation, Sportvisserij Nederland, which is responsible for a wide range of issues including monitoring catch and size limits in saltwater, and ensuring fish stocks in both fresh and salt water are maintained.

In 2016, Pieter Beelan, who works for Sportvisserij Nederland, invited me to attend an event known as Sharkatag. During the event, anglers provide extra help for

On the way to the Sharkatag



research into sharks and rays, which supports the European Union Action Plan for the conservation and management of sharks.

“One hundred anglers a day go offshore to catch as many sharks as possible, and tag them in the name of science. The event lasts three to four days, so there will be 400 anglers in total,” Pieter revealed.

Special guests are invited to improve awareness. These include politicians, journalists and environmental organisations.

TAGGING PROGRAMME

“The Sharkatag project was originally founded by the SSACN (Scottish Sea Angling Conservation Network). When I was fishing for tope in Scotland I met charter skipper Ian Burrett and he told me about their Sharkatag. I thought this was so cool and asked him if we could do the same in the Netherlands,” added Pieter.

On the first morning of the event, I asked Niels Breve, a biologist responsible for the



Anglers tag the sharks in the name of science

tagging programme, to explain its objectives.

“When a shark is tagged, the location, gender, date, time, length and weight of the fish is written down. Each shark gets an individual number on the tag,” he said.

“When it is recaptured, the angler or commercial fisherman can contact us at the email address shown on the tag. By collecting and analysing this data, valuable information is obtained that can be used to gain an insight into the population, their behaviour or dissemination. These factors can then be used to give the fish a protected status.”

Sportvisserij Nederland wants to see all sharks and rays caught in the North Sea by anglers or commercial fisherman returned alive. Its tagging programme started in 2010, and in 2012 the first Sharkatag was held. Since then, 3,500 sharks have been tagged and there have been 160 recorded recaptures.

His data revealed the longest migration of smoothhounds known to science, with a fish that was tagged near Neeltje Jans (Zeeland) being recaptured in France near the border with Spain. That fish had travelled 2,000km. There was also a recapture from Norway and another one from Scotland.

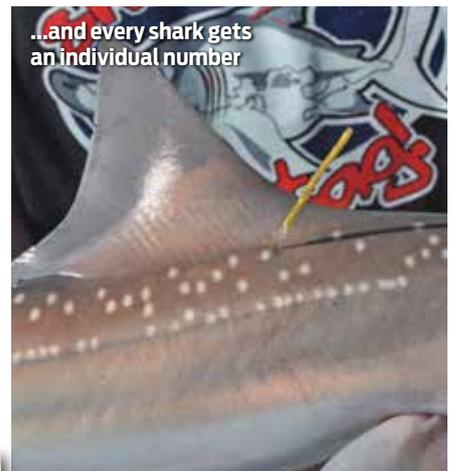
“Thanks to Sharkatag, we now know that smoothhounds appear in our waters in spring and leave in autumn to travel south, with the big females travelling further south than males, some of which actually head north. Only with the help of our anglers can we get enough data that can be used to protect these fish so we can still fish for them in the future,” said Niels.

There are only a few species of shark in Dutch waters, and the most common is the smoothhound (*Mustelus asterias*). Increasing numbers of stingrays are being caught in Zeeland, along with a few dogfish. In summer there are a few tope to 27kg, but other shark or ray species are very rare.

Confirming that there are not two species



The tagging machine...



...and every shark gets an individual number



Each capture is photographed, and location, gender, date, time, length and weight recorded



Measuring another hound

of hounds in European waters, common and starry, as previously thought, but only one, Niels explained: “We have taken samples from many smoothhounds for DNA analysis, and all have come back identical, confirming that there is only one species, the starry smoothhound.”

BIG DIFFERENCE

When the time came I boarded my allocated boat, which was the former UK charter boat Valkyrie, one of 10 local boats that were chartered for the event.

A big difference between the UK charter boat scene and what is typical throughout most of the rest of Europe is that they use very light boat rods matched with a small 4000-6000 size fixed-spool reels. That is the size most UK sea anglers use for spinning from the shore. I didn't see a single multiplier reel in three days.

Fixed-spool reels are becoming a more common sight on UK charter boats and, given the engineering that goes into manufacturing modern reels, along with braided lines, that trend will increase.

It was fascinating to watch politicians and staff from many influential organisations get their first experience of sport fishing. The next time these influential people are tasked with legislation or funding allocations that effect sea angling, such a positive personal experience could only work in our favour. We should consider such an event here in the UK.

The fishing was good, but never hectic. Despite less than perfect weather, a lot of hounds were caught, tagged and released. There were several stingrays, and plenty of scad, dabs, soles and a few whiting.

I enjoyed my Dutch Sharkatag experience, and will relate further observations in future articles in Sea Angler. ■