



**NOAA** NATIONAL OCEANIC AND  
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## **Where Do Coastal Sharks Give Birth and Raise Their Young?**

### **COASTSPAN: Another Piece of the Apex Predators Story**

Learning more about where coastal shark species give birth and raise their young is a major focus of the Cooperative Atlantic States Shark Pupping and Nursery program, or COASTSPAN. The COASTSPAN program, the first of its kind in the U.S., is managed and coordinated by the Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC) through the Apex Predators Program (APP) based at the NEFSC's Narragansett Laboratory in Narragansett, R.I.

COASTSPAN scientists survey Atlantic coastal waters from Florida to Massachusetts and in the U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI) to determine the location of shark nursery grounds and the species composition and habitat preferences of sharks that occur on these grounds. The survey, accomplished through longline and gillnet sampling and mark-recapture techniques, records the relative abundance, distribution, and migration of sharks on the nursery grounds.

Cami McCandless heads the program, which began in the late 1990s. In the early years the NEFSC collaborated with Albion College to conduct exploratory surveys in the Dry Tortugas off the Florida Keys to determine their use as mating and nursery habitat for the nurse shark. The surveys resulted in the first NOAA Fisheries Habitat Area of Particular Concern (HAPC) and seasonal closures of the area by the National Park Service to protect the mating and nursery grounds.

Since then, COASTSPAN surveys have led to the designation of Delaware Bay as a HAPC for juvenile sandbar sharks, and to the identification of a critical shark nursery habitat in Fish Bay, USVI, for blacktip and lemon sharks.

"Many coastal shark species use state estuarine waters as nursery habitat. Our collaborations with state agencies, universities, and other Apex Predators Program staff have enhanced our understanding of how sharks use these areas," said McCandless. "These collaborations have contributed to better information on shark food habits, migration patterns, reproductive aspects, and age and growth that have contributed to improved stock assessments and management for several coastal shark species."

COASTSPAN program participants in 2012 were the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources, the North Carolina Division of

Marine Fisheries, and the University of North Florida. Many of these agencies have been longtime participants, conducting surveys in their state's waters on a regular basis.

NEFSC conducts the survey in Narragansett and Delaware Bays, as well as additional sampling in the USVI and in Massachusetts waters in conjunction with the Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries.

The annual survey is usually conducted during the summer in Narragansett and Delaware Bays, and in Massachusetts' waters. Further south, such as off the coasts of North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia, the survey may be conducted from late spring into early fall, or even year round depending on the location, such as off Florida and around the U.S Virgin Islands.

Standardized indices of abundance from COASTSPAN surveys are used in the stock assessments for large and small coastal sharks. Data from the program have also been used to identify Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) for coastal shark species managed in the U.S. Atlantic. EFH includes all types of aquatic habitats – from wetlands and sea grasses to coral reefs and rivers – where fish during various life stages spawn, breed, feed or grow to maturity.

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Related links:

Apex Predators Program home page: <http://na.nefsc.noaa.gov/sharks/>

COASTSPAN: <http://na.nefsc.noaa.gov/sharks/coastspan.html>

COASTSPAN in Georgia: <http://coastalgadnr.org/fb/fmgmt/coastspan>

COASTSPAN at the University of North Florida:  
[http://www.unf.edu/publicrelations/marketing\\_publications/journal/2011-Winter/UNF\\_biotologists\\_attack\\_shark\\_research.aspx](http://www.unf.edu/publicrelations/marketing_publications/journal/2011-Winter/UNF_biotologists_attack_shark_research.aspx)

South Carolina's Coastal Shark Studies: <http://www.dnr.sc.gov/marine/mrri/shark.html>