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CAPTURE OF A JUVENILE BASKING SHARK, *CETORHINUS MAXIMUS*
(CETORHINIDAE), OFF THE SYRIAN COAST, WITH COMMENTS ON THE
OCCURRENCE OF THE SPECIES IN THE LEVANT BASIN
(EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN SEA)

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ABSTRACT

*The authors report the capture of a young basking shark, *Cetorhinus maximus*, in the Levant Basin, measuring 259 cm in total length and weighing 63 kg. According to the fisherman who captured it, the shark was part of a shoal of 40 other young specimens. Additionally, a brief report is presented listing several juvenile basking sharks among *C. maximus* captures in the Levant Basin, along with the capture of a large pregnant female years ago. This suggests that a viable population of the species may be established in the region. However, a management plan should be implemented to protect *C. maximus* and prevent the total disappearance of the species in the area.*

Key words: *Cetorhinus maximus*, shoal, population, distribution, Syrian coast, Levant Basin

CATTURA DI UN GIOVANE SQUALO ELEFANTE, *CETORHINUS MAXIMUS*
(CETORHINIDAE), AL LARGO DELLA COSTA SIRIANA, CON OSSERVAZIONI SULLA
PRESENZA DELLA SPECIE NEL BACINO DEL LEVANTE (MARE MEDITERRANEO ORIENTALE)

SINTESI

*Gli autori riportano la cattura nel bacino del Levante di un giovane squalo elefante, *Cetorhinus maximus*, con una lunghezza totale di 259 cm e un peso di 63 kg. Secondo il pescatore che lo ha catturato, lo squalo faceva parte di un banco di altri 40 esemplari giovani. Nell'articolo viene inoltre presentato un breve rapporto che elenca diversi giovani squali elefante tra le catture di *C. maximus* nel bacino del Levante, insieme alla cattura di una grande femmina gravida anni fa. Ciò suggerisce che una popolazione vitale della specie potrebbe essersi stabilita nella regione. Tuttavia, è necessario attuare un piano di gestione per proteggere *C. maximus* e prevenire la totale scomparsa della specie nell'area.*

Parole chiave: *Cetorhinus maximus*, banco, popolazione, distribuzione, costa siriana, bacino del Levante

INTRODUCTION

The basking shark, *Cetorhinus maximus* (Gunnerus, 1765), is a large, highly migratory species with world-wide distribution (Quéro, 1984). It is a massive coastal pelagic shark, generally found in boreal to warm-temperate waters and frequently sighted in the open sea. There have been instances of specimens entering enclosed bays and usually being captured, as well as others being found stranded on beaches (Compagno, 1984). Seasonal segregation appears to be characteristic of this species, which used to be the target of intensive fishery across the British Isles, Ireland, and in the southern coast of Britain (Chenard *et al.*, 1951). The flesh was not highly valued for human consumption, but the large quantities of oil in the liver were used in cosmetics and pharmaceuticals, and the skin was made into leather (Chenard *et al.*, 1951). Fishing pressure, together with the species' K-selected characteristics, contributed to a drastic decline of *C. maximus* in areas where it was previously abundant, leading to the cessation of some local fisheries (Compagno, 1984; Sims *et al.*, 2003).

C. maximus is found in the Mediterranean Sea, where it has been more commonly recorded in the western basin (Mancusi *et al.*, 2005) and in the Adriatic Sea (Soldo & Lipej, 2022). Lipej & Mavrič (2015) reported the capture of a juvenile basking shark measuring 217 cm in total length (TL) and weighing 40 kg in the northern Adriatic Sea, off Piran, and noted that the species, previously rare in this area, has been recorded with relative abundance since 1990, including 100 sightings or captures, with several specimens measuring less than 400 cm, or even less than 300 cm TL.

The species occurs southward along the Maghreb shore, from the Moroccan coast (Lloris & Rucabado, 1998), through Algeria (Mokrane, 2023) and Tunisia (Capapé *et al.*, 2003) to the Libyan coast (Shakman *et al.*, 2023). *C. maximus* is also reported from the marine waters around the Maltese Islands (Borg *et al.*, 2023).

The basking shark was previously considered a rare species in the eastern Mediterranean. According to Ergüden *et al.* (2020), the first well-documented record of the species in this region came from the Gulf of Antalya, reported by Kideys (1997), while Kabasakal (2002) noted that the first sighting of the species in Turkish marine waters occurred during the 1950s. Kabasakal (2013) and Ergüden *et al.* (2020) both list the specimens recorded and sighted in the broader region, including the Levant Basin.

In this latter area, *C. maximus* appears to be caught only sporadically (Ben-Tuvia, 1971; Bariche & Fricke, 2020; Bitar & Badreddine, 2021). However, the capture of the young specimen described herein, along with that of a large pregnant female some years previously, offer an opportunity to comment on the true status of the species in the studied area, the Levant Basin and the eastern Mediterranean Sea.

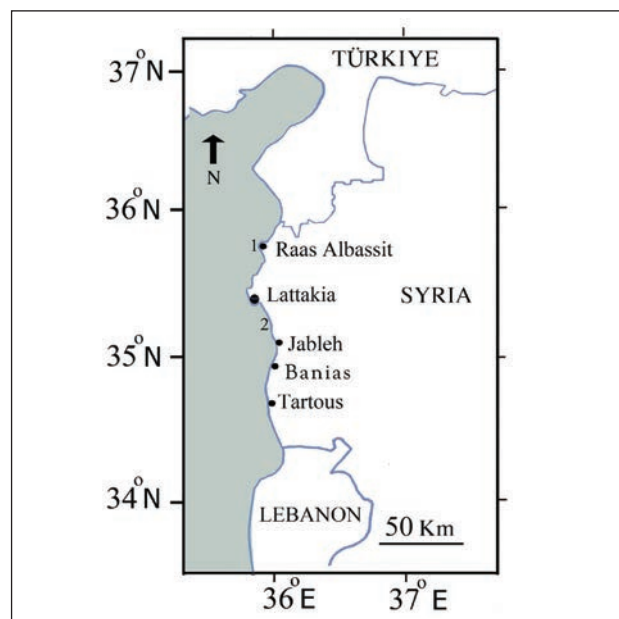


Fig. 1: Map of the Syrian coast with numbers indicating the capture sites of specimens of *Cetorhinus maximus*: 1. Ali *et al.* (2012); 2. this study.

Sl. 1: Zemljevid sirske morske obale s številkami, ki označujejo lokalitete ulova primerkov vrste *Cetorhinus maximus*: 1. Ali in sod. (2012); 2. ta raziskava.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

On 27 February 2024, a specimen of *C. maximus* was captured in Syrian marine waters (Fig. 1), using demersal fixed net, at a depth of 2 m, over a soft bottom, off the Al-Shkaifat site between Lattakia and Jableh city (35°24'50" N; 35°53'45" E). The fisherman reported that the specimen was part of a shoal of up to 40 young *C. maximus* of similar size.

Some morphometric measurements were taken and recorded to the nearest centimetre, with total body weight recorded to the nearest kilogram. These measurements are summarised in Table 1 and compared with similar features noted in a large female previously captured in the same area (Ali *et al.*, 2012).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

C. maximus is considered the second largest fish in the world, following the whale shark, *Rhincodon typus* (Smith, 1828). Its maximum total length (TL) is noted to be between 12.2 and 15.2 m, although most specimens do not exceed 9.8 m (Compagno, 1984).

Large specimens display the following anatomic characteristics: trunk fusiform and stout; head long, but shorter than trunk; snout moderately long, pointed, and conical; eyes small; 5 extremely long gill slits extending onto dorsal and ventral surfaces of head, gill rakers present on internal

Tab. 1: The morphometric measurements in centimetres (cm) and as percentages of total length (%TL), along with the total body weight recorded for the current specimen of *C. maximus* captured off the Syrian coast, compared with those of a specimen captured in 2012 (Ali *et al.*, 2012).

Tab. 1: Morfometrične meritve v centimetrih (cm) in kot delež celotne dolžine (%TL) ter celokupna telesna teža za primerek morskega psa orjaka *C. maximus*, ujetega ob sirski obali, v primerjavi s primerkom, ujetim leta 2012 (Ali in sod., 2012).

References	This study		Ali <i>et al.</i> (2012)	
Morphometric measurements	cm	%TL	cm	%TL
Total length	259	100%	690	100%
Head length	78	30.1	128	18.6
Pre-branchial length	61	23.6	90	13.0
Pre-orbital length	27	10.4	32	4.6
Pre-first dorsal-fin length	120	46.3	244	35.4
Pre-second dorsal fin length	173	66.8	475	68.8
Pre-pectoral-fin length	58	22.4	-	-
Pre-pelvic-fin length	132	51.0	375	54.3
Pre-anal-fin length	191	73.7	485	70.3
Total weight (Kg)	63		2500	

gill slits; teeth minute and numerous; dermal denticles with extremely elongated crowns; caudal peduncle depressed, with strong lateral keels, caudal fin nearly asymmetrical, with a well-developed lower lobe.

The current specimen measured 259 cm TL and weighed 63 kg. It was a juvenile, displaying a rather elongated body (Fig. 2) and a large, pointed snout, compressed at the sides and slightly curved at the distal end (Fig. 3).

Kabasakal (2013) and Ergüden *et al.* (2020) provide two lists of *C. maximus* captures and/or sightings, one for the eastern Mediterranean in general and another focusing on the Levant Basin. They include male and female specimens of large sizes, as well as some juvenile individuals. Prior

to the current specimen measuring 259 cm TL, young *C. maximus* were reported by Ben-Tuvia (1971) at 259 cm and 261 cm TL, Kabasakal (2013) at 236 cm and 300 cm TL, and Ergüden *et al.* (2020) at 275 cm TL. *C. maximus* appears to be rare, yet still present in the area (Kabasakal, 2013). However, Kabasakal (2013) also noted that the occurrence of young specimens does not indicate the presence of a nursery ground in the region but is likely a result of zooplankton abundance, as suggested by Sims *et al.* (1997) and Soldo *et al.* (2018).

Carpaye-Taïlamée (2019) noted that sightings of *C. maximus* were generally not abundant in the Gulf of Lion on the southern coast of France. However, observations



Fig. 2: A juvenile *C. maximus* captured off the Syrian coast, near the Al-Shkaifat site between Lattakia and Jableh city. Scale bar = 15 cm.

Sl. 2: Mladostni primerek vrste *C. maximus* ujet ob sirski obali blizu lokalitete Al-Shkaifat med Lattakio in Jableh city. Merilo = 15 cm.



Fig. 3: Head of the young specimen of *C. maximus* showing: 1. Curve at the distal end of the snout; 2. Snout; 3. Internal branchial arches. Scale bar = 10 cm.

Sl. 3: Glava mladega primerka vrste *C. maximus*, ki kaže: 1. ukrivljen distalni del gobca; 2. gobec; 3. notranji škržni loki. Merilo = 10 cm.

carried out over a brief period indicated that the species' occurrence in the area may be correlated with higher phytoplanktonic development. As phytoplankton (*sensu lato*) is consumed by zooplankton species, contributing to their reproduction and development – the relationship between phytoplankton and zooplankton has been well-documented in some regions of the eastern tropical Atlantic (Le Borgne, 1979) –, the increased phytoplanktonic development in the Gulf of Lion could explain the presence of *C. maximus* in the area.

The capture of the current specimen, the concomitant sighting of 40 young individuals, and the earlier capture of a pregnant female (Ali *et al.*, 2012) clearly suggest that a viable population exists in the area, which may also serve as a nursery ground for the species. This phenomenon is likely due to the abundance of several zooplanktonic species in the marine waters of the Levant Basin, but also

in other areas of the eastern Mediterranean Sea according to Insibilir *et al.* (2022).

The abundance of zooplankton contributes to maintaining the occurrence of *C. maximus* in the Levant Basin, the broader eastern Mediterranean, and the Mediterranean Sea as a whole. Due to the species' K-selected biological characteristics (cf. Mellinger, 1989), and in total agreement with Ergüden *et al.* (2020), a management plan should be implemented in Syrian and other Mediterranean fisheries to protect *C. maximus* and prevent the decline and disappearance of the species.

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ULOV MLADOSTNEGA PRIMERKA MORSKEGA PSA ORJAKA, *CETORHINUS MAXIMUS* (CETORHINIDAE), OB SIRSKI OBALI S KOMENTARJI O POJAVLJANJU VRSTE V LEVANTSKEM BAZENU (VZHDONO SREDOZEMSKO MORJE)

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POVZETEK

Avtorji poročajo o ulovu mladostnega morskega psa orjaka, *Cetorhinus maximus*, v levantskem bazenu, ki je meril 259 cm v dolžino in tehtal 63 kg. Po navedbah ribiča, ki ga je ujel, naj bi bil primerek del jate 40 mladih morskih psov orjakov. Nadalje avtorji navajajo primere številnih ulovov mladostnih primerkov vrste *C. maximus* v seznamu ulovov v Levantskem bazenu skupaj z ulovom velike breje samice izpred nekaj let. To kaže na dejstvo, da se lahko na raziskovanem območju vzpostavi viabilna populacija te vrste. S tem v zvezi je potrebno pripraviti načrt upravljanja z namenom varovanja vrste *C. maximus* in preprečiti njeno izginotje na obravnavanem območju.

Ključne besede: *Cetorhinus maximus*, jata, populacija, razširjenost, sirska obala, levantski bazen

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