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ADDITIONAL CAPTURES OF SMOOTHBACK ANGEL SHARK *SQUATINA OCULATA* (SQUATINIDAE) FROM THE TUNISIAN COAST (CENTRAL MEDITERRANEAN SEA)

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ABSTRACT

*The present paper reports the captures of two specimens of smoothback angelshark *Squatina oculata* Bonaparte, 1840 from the northern Tunisian coast. The specimens were two large females measuring 1.70 m and 1.60 m in total length and weighed 30 kg and 25 kg in total body weight, respectively. The smaller female carried yellow yolked oocytes and was probably at the beginning of its pregnancy. A total of eight smoothback angelsharks were caught between 2005 and 2021, which indicates a decline of captures in the area. However, the species is not extinct, but as in all Mediterranean regions it needs a management plan to preserve viable populations.*

Key words: *Squatina oculata*, distribution, viable populations, management plan, large specimens

NUOVE CATTURE DI SQUADRO PELLE ROSSA *SQUATINA OCULATA* (SQUATINIDAE) LUNGO LA COSTA TUNISINA (MEDITERRANEO CENTRALE)

SINTESI

*Il presente lavoro riporta la cattura di due esemplari di squadro pelle rossa *Squatina oculata* Bonaparte, 1840 lungo la costa tunisina settentrionale. Gli esemplari erano due femmine di grandi dimensioni che misuravano 1,70 m e 1,60 m di lunghezza totale e pesavano rispettivamente 30 kg e 25 kg di peso corporeo totale. La femmina più piccola portava ovociti gialli e probabilmente era all'inizio della gravidanza. Tra il 2005 e il 2021 sono stati catturati in totale otto esemplari di squadro pelle rossa, il che indica un calo delle catture nell'area. Tuttavia, la specie non è estinta, ma come in tutte le regioni mediterranee necessita di un piano di gestione per preservare popolazioni vitali.*

Parole chiave: *Squatina oculata*, distribuzione, popolazioni vitali, piano di gestione, grandi esemplari

INTRODUCTION

The smoothback angelshark *Squatina oculata* Bonaparte, 1840 is known in the eastern tropical Atlantic waters extending from Morocco (Lloris & Rucabado, 1998) to probably Angola (Roux, 1984). From off the coasts of Senegal downwards it is abundant enough to allow the study of some traits of the reproductive biology of the species (Capapé *et al.*, 2002). *S. oculata* is of important economic interest in the area, targeted by craft fisheries and landed in relative abundance at local fishing sites (Diatta, *pers. comm.*, 2023).

In the Mediterranean Sea, *Squatina oculata* occurs together with two congeneric species, the sawback angelshark *S. aculeata* Cuvier, 1829 and the common angelshark *S. squatina* (Linnaeus, 1758). (Roux, 1984). *S. oculata* appears to be unknown off the Mediterranean coast of France (Capapé *et al.*, 2000), conversely, Tortonese (1956) noted its occurrence in Italian waters, and Zava *et al.* (2016) collected 4 juvenile specimens from the Strait of Sicily. Additionally, Zava *et al.* (2022) observed 21 specimens off the Malta Islands.

S. oculata is reported from the eastern Mediterranean, where its occurrence was first confirmed in the Levant Basin (Golani, 2005) and furtherly reported from the Syrian coast (Ali, 2018) and the Lebanese

coast (Bariche & Fricke, 2020). Ergüden *et al.* (2019) listed the records of *S. oculata* throughout the Turkish waters, but the species is considered rather rare in the region and caught only sporadically.

S. oculata used to be reported as relatively abundant off the Tunisian coast, especially in the northern areas, and information on its reproductive biology was provided (Capapé *et al.*, 1990). Southwards, Bradaï *et al.* (2002) reported captures of specimens in the Gulf of Gabès. Six specimens were detected between 2005 and 2021 in Tunisian marine waters according to Zava *et al.* (2022). The present paper reports two more captures of *S. oculata* specimens that occurred during 2021 in the same area.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The first specimen of *S. oculata* was caught on 25 April 2021, by trammel net at a depth of 61–62 m, over a sandy-muddy bottom, together with specimens of common cuttlefish *Sepia officinalis* Linnaeus, 1758 and starry weever *Trachinus radiatus* Cuvier, 1829. The capture occurred off the fishing site of Sidi Daoud (37°3'51" N and 10°57'39" E), where it was landed (Fig. 1).

The second specimen was caught on 27 April 2021, by trammel net at a depth of 30–35 m, over a sandy-muddy bottom, together with specimens of

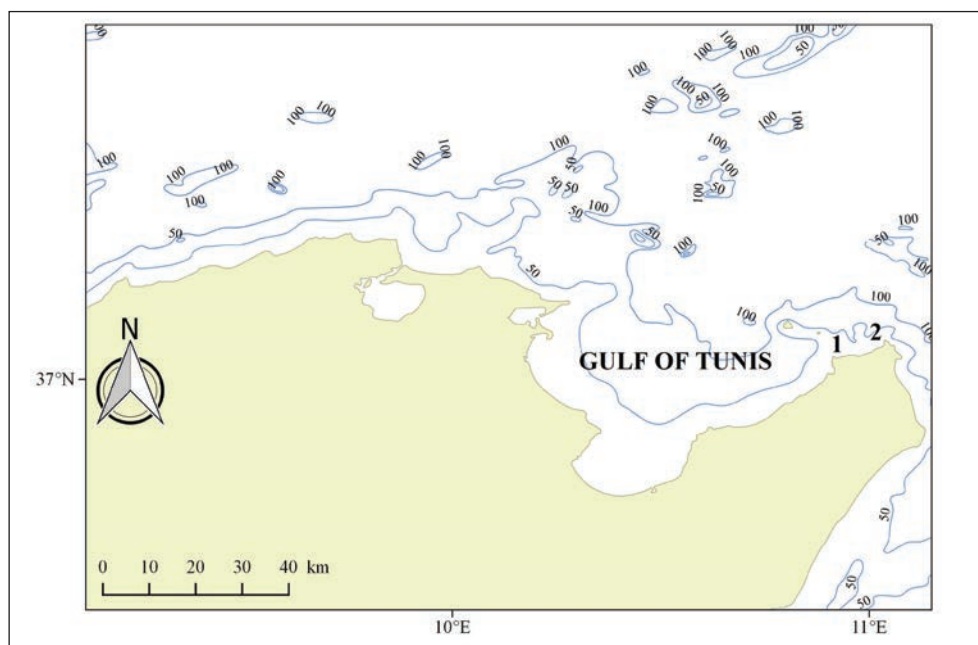


Fig. 1: Map of the northern Tunisian coast indicating: 1. Capture site of the first *Squatina oculata* off Sidi Daoud. 2. Capture site of the second *S. oculata* off El Haouaria.

Sl. 1: Zemljevid severne tunizijske obale z označenimi: 1. Lokaliteta ulova prvega primerka vrste *Squatina oculata* v vodah blizu Sidi Daoud. 2. Lokaliteta ulova drugega primerka vrste *Squatina oculata* v vodah blizu El Haouaria.



Fig. 2. First *Squatina oculata* captured off Sidi Daoud, with front of head showing: 1. barbels bordering a fringed median lobe, 2. dermal folds on sides of head slightly undulated, scale bar = 500 mm.

Sl. 2: Prvi primerek vrste *Squatina oculata*, ujet v vodah blizu Sidi Daoud; sprednji del glave kaže: 1. Izrastke, ki mejijo na resasti srednji reženj, 2. Rahlo nagubane kožne gube na straneh glave, merilo = 500 mm.



Fig. 3: Second *Squatina oculata* captured off El Haouaria, scale bar = 500 mm.

Sl. 3: Drugi primerek vrste *Squatina oculata* ujet v vodah blizu El Haouaria.

smoothhound *Mustelus mustelus* (Linnaeus, 1758), John Dory Zeus *faber* Linnaeus, 1758, and *T. radiatus*. The capture occurred off the fishing site of El Haouaria (37°3'51" N and 11°1'10" E), where it was landed (Fig. 1). Both specimens were measured for total length (TL) and total body weight (TBW), the information was provided by the fishermen. The specimens were cut into slices and rapidly sold, and no morphometric measurements could be carried out at the fishing sites.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first specimen was a female measuring 1.70 m TL and weighing 30 kg TBW (Fig. 2). The second specimen, also a female, measured 1.60 m TL, weighed 25 kg and carried yellow yolked oocytes (Fig. 3). Both specimens were identified as *S. oculata* based on the combination of the following main morphological characters: trunk very broad; eye diameter equal or larger than spiracle length; exter-

nal nasal flap with two barbels bordering a fringed median lobe (Fig. 2.1); dermal folds on sides of head slightly undulated (Fig. 2.2); pectoral fins very high and broad with rounded rear tips; hind tips of pelvic fins not reaching the level of first dorsal fin origin, dorsal surface rough with a median line of small spines, lower surface with small denticles only on front margin of pectoral and pelvic fins and down the centre of tail; teeth pointed, slightly curved at the distal end and with triangular base; greyish-brown back with some white spots, belly beige. The description and colour of both specimens are in complete accordance with Roux (1986), Capapé & Roux (1980), Compagno (1984), Kabasakal and Kabasakal (2014), Ergüden et al. (2019), Rafrafi-Nouira et al. (2022), and Akyol et al. (2023).

Roux (1984) state the maximum TL for *S. oculata* to be 1.50 m and TWB 35 kg. Later, Ergüden et al. (2019) suggested that the species could reach up to 160 cm TL, with a common TL of 120 cm. Rafrafi-Nouira et al. (2022) reported the captures of two large specimens from the northern Tunisian coast measuring 1350 mm and 1400 mm, respectively, while the present specimens are the largest known to date in this area and probably

outside it as well. It appears that between 2002 and 2022 a total of eight specimens were captured in the entire Tunisian coast, which could suggest a drastic decline of the species' population. However, according to the data provided by Zava *et al.* (2022), a total of 32 specimens were captured in the central Mediterranean Sea, among them five neonate specimens and one female at the beginning of its pregnancy like in the present study. This would seem to indicate that a viable population still exists in the region, and possibly one or more nursery grounds. Akyol *et al.* (2023) listed the captures of specimens from the eastern Mediterranean between 1996 and the present and noted a permanent presence of the species in the region despite scarce captures. Therefore, based on the data provided by Ergüden *et al.* (2019), Rafrafi-Nouira *et al.* (2022), Zava *et al.* (2022)

and Akyol *et al.* (2023), we can conclude that the species is not extinct in the Mediterranean Sea despite facing significant fishing pressure as a result of its *k*-selected reproductive characteristics.

Therefore, following Ergüden *et al.* (2019), Kabasakal (2021), Zava *et al.* (2022) and Akyol *et al.* (2023), a management plan should be developed that involves local fisheries and encourages the active participation of fishermen. They are aware of the crucial role they can play in preserving *S. oculata* and preventing its extinction in areas where it is typically found.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NOVA ULOVA PEGASTEGA SKLATA *SQUATINA OCULATA* (SQUATINIDAE) IZ TUINIZIJSKE OBALE (OSREDNJE SREDOZEMSKO MORJE)

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POVZETEK

V prispevku avtorji poročajo o ulovu dveh primerkov pegastega sklata *Squatina oculata* Bonaparte, 1840 iz severne tunizijske obale. Bili sta veliki samici, od katerih je prva merila 1,70 m v dolžino in tehtala 30 kg, druga pa je merila 1,60 m in tehtala 25 kg. Manjša samica je imela rumene oocyte z rumenjakom in je bila verjetno na začetku obdobja brejosti. Med leti 2005 in 2021 je bilo ujetih osem pegastih sklatov, kar kaže na upad števila ulovov v obravnavanem predelu. Kakorkoli že, vrsta še ni izumrla, je pa potrebno poskrbeti za načrt upravljanja, da bi uspeli zagotoviti vijabilne populacije.

Ključne besede: *Squatina oculata*, razširjenost, vijabilne populacije, načrt upravljanja, veliki primerki

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