

June 26 – International Angel Shark Day

Cyprus is home to one of the rarest and most threatened sharks of the Mediterranean

June 26th is established as International Angel Shark Day, a day dedicated to raising awareness about the conservation of one of the most endangered shark genera in the world. Angel sharks (*Squatina* spp.) are not only unique marine species but also widely misunderstood. Their flattened bodies often lead to them being mistaken for rays, but they are indeed **sharks**, with a distinctive body shape.

All **three angel shark** species found in the Mediterranean have also been recorded in Cyprus: the common angelshark (*Squatina squatina*), the smoothback angelshark (*Squatina oculata*), and the sawback angelshark (*Squatina aculeata*). These three species are strictly protected under European legislation, and their Mediterranean populations have been assessed as **Critically Endangered** by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), with estimated population declines of around 80%, and in some parts of the Mediterranean, local extinctions have been observed.

Angel sharks play a crucial role in marine ecosystems. As top predators, they help maintain the balance of food webs, and their presence is an indicator of a healthy marine environment. Their loss, in contrast, Reveals alarming disturbances within the ecosystem.

Their protection depends directly on human action. When angel sharks are accidentally caught in fishing gear, they must be immediately released and reported to the Department of Fisheries and Marine Research (DFMR) according to the terms of fishing licenses. Possession, landing, or sale of these species is strictly prohibited.

Our knowledge of angel sharks in Cyprus has increased significantly in recent years thanks to coordinated collaborative efforts, citizen science data, and the National Fisheries Data Collection Programme, implemented by the DFMR and co-funded by the European Union. Organisations such as iSea, Enalia Physis, Marine and Environmental Research (MER) Lab, and the DFMR are working to map the distribution of these species in Cyprus and identify critical areas for their breeding and feeding. Understanding their geographic distribution is the first and most essential step toward effective protection.

It is worth noting that although angel shark records remain limited, recent scientific evidence suggests that Cyprus' coastal zones provide suitable living conditions for these species.



DEPARTMENT OF FISHERIES
AND MARINE RESEARCH (DFMR)

With coordinated action, public awareness, and strengthened protection measures, Cyprus has the potential to become a key refuge for angel sharks in the Mediterranean.