

THE ECOLOGY AND BIOLOGY OF WOBEGONG SHARKS  
(GENUS *ORECTOLOBUS*) IN RELATION TO THE  
COMMERCIAL FISHERY IN NEW SOUTH WALES,  
AUSTRALIA



BY  
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Thesis submitted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor  
of Philosophy



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February 2007





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## Summary

In New South Wales (NSW), Australia, wobbegong sharks (Orectolobidae) have been commercially targeted by the Ocean Trap and Line Fishery since 1991. A catch decrease of *ca.* 50% in a decade lead to concern over the sustainability of the fishery and to wobbegongs being listed as Vulnerable in NSW under the World Conservation Union (IUCN) Red List assessment. The aim of this research was to investigate wobbegong biology and ecology in relation to its fishery to provide essential data and information for sustainable management of the wobbegong fishery. Biological data was obtained from 904 wobbegongs collected from commercial fishing boats, using setlines and lobster pots and by scuba diving.

Previously, two species of wobbegongs were known to occur in NSW: the spotted wobbegong (*Orectolobus maculatus*) and the ornate wobbegong (*O. ornatus*). This study discovered a new species (*O. halei*) described as a subspecies by Whitley (1940), but which had been synonymised with *O. ornatus* due to a lack of taxonomic investigation. An identification key was developed that will allow fishers to correctly identify wobbegongs to species level and to report catch accordingly. Correct species identification allows for the implementation of species-specific management regulations, previously not possible.

A diver survey indicated that wobbegongs are more abundant in northern NSW and that size segregation might occur as the absence of neonates and small juveniles suggest that they may be elsewhere, possibly located in nursery areas.

Passive acoustic tracking of *O. halei* suggested that at least some wobbegongs have long-term residency. Diel patterns were also observed with sharks more frequently recorded during daylight hours than at night. The long-term residency pattern found in this preliminary study suggests that temporal closures or marine protected areas may be effective tools for the management and conservation of local populations.

Morphometric relationships between partial and total lengths; and carcass and total mass were developed to correct for the common commercial fishing practice of landing trunks only. The length-frequency of wobbegongs collected during this study also shows that neonates and small juveniles were absent from the catches.

Dietary examination indicated that wobbegongs fed primarily on bony fishes, but also consumed cephalopods and chondrichthyans. Wobbegongs were frequently gut-hooked (80–90% of the catch), potentially leading to high post-release mortality rates. Diet did not vary between the sexes, but interspecific differences were evident and were related to the total length of the shark. The high trophic level of wobbegongs means that their removal from the ecosystem may have impacts at lower trophic levels.

Reproductive parameters of wobbegong were investigated to provide a biological basis for the management of a commercial fishery targeting wobbegongs.  $L_{50}$  for male and female maturity was *ca.* 800 mm, 1250 mm, and 1750 mm TL for *O. ornatus*, *O. maculatus* and *O. halei*, respectively. These species of wobbegong had synchronous, triennial reproductive cycles. During the first year, follicles remained small, and then grew rapidly during the second year prior to ovulation during November. Gestation lasted *ca.* 10–11 months and parturition occurred during

October–November. Mean litter sizes were *ca.* 9 and 21 for *O. ornatus* and *O. maculatus*, respectively, and increased with female total length in *O. ornatus*. No pregnant *O. halei* were sampled. Pregnant *O. ornatus* and *O. maculatus* were frequently caught in northern NSW and no pregnant wobbegongs, or females with large, yolky follicles were captured south of Sydney. Differences in the reproductive stages of wobbegongs caught in northern and central NSW suggested geographically dependent reproductive behaviour.

Age and growth information was also investigated. Periodicity of growth band deposition could not be determined using marginal increment ratio, edge analysis, and growth rate and chemical marking of captive sharks. Counts of growth bands using whole vertebrae consistently underestimated age compared to thin sections. Growth parameters were obtained and compared using four different models, and counts from whole vertebrae and thin sections, and a combination of observed and back-calculated lengths-at-age. Growth parameters could not conclusively be determined because validation of growth bands and vertebral preparation was not possible.



## **Declaration**

I hereby declare that this work is my own, except where otherwise acknowledged. It has not been submitted in any form for another degree or diploma at any university or other institution. All work conducted for this dissertation was conducted under the Macquarie University Animal Research Authority 2003/011 and the NSW DPI Research Permit P03/0057.

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CHARLIE HUVENEERS



## Acknowledgements

First of all, I would like to thank my mother, without whom this Ph.D. would never have been possible. Thanks to her advice, support and self-sacrifice I was able to accomplish my dreams and come to Australia to undertake this project. I would also like to thank Christophe Sykes and Colin Speedie who were the first people to talk to me about the opportunities of doing a Ph.D. Christophe also helped in the application process for my undergraduate course in England, without which my Australian scholarship would have been impossible to obtain.

Working on such project for over three years is not an easy task and it would not have been possible without the intellectual support provided by my supervisors Rob Harcourt and Nick Otway. Both have taught me a lot and provided support throughout the candidature. I would also like to thank Terry Walker at the same level as my supervisors. Although he was not officially involved in this Ph.D., Terry provided me with intellectual and financial support. I have learnt a huge amount from him and was also given the opportunity to work with him and his students, increasing my knowledge of chondrichthyan biology and ecology and enabling me to participate in intensive forums of discussion.

Sample collection was probably the trickiest and most important part of my Ph.D. candidature. Although I contacted a large number of commercial fishers for collaboration on this project at the start of my research, only a handful went out of their way to help. This thesis would not exist without them and for that I would like to express my greatest gratitude to Reala ‘Wombat’ Brislane and Red from Nambucca Heads, Jason ‘hammer-time’ Moyce and Shaun, and Ian Puckeridge from Sydney, Mark Phelps from Port Stephens, Peter ‘huru’ Christensen from Newcastle, and Shannon ‘22’ Fantham from Eden. Many other fishers such as Brad Plummer, Ted Giles and Steve Sounness also helped me through face-to-face or phone conversations and were very helpful in gathering information necessary to organise my sample collection.

Those sampling trips would probably have not been as exciting without the entertainment and bonuses provided by many interns, students, volunteers and friends who came along during sampling and diving trips or helped in the lab to cut shark gonads, play with wobbegong claspers and feel sick from the aroma of stomach content remains. Interns included Robert Driscoll, Paula

Lam, Angela Orthmeyer and Dustin Hoffman; students included Georgie; volunteers included Gary Hannon, Helen Smith and Oliver; and friends included Claudia, Ulysse ‘Frenchy’ Bove, Dan ‘scooby’ Butt, Shannon ‘love mornings’ Corrigan, Robert ‘best dive, best surf ever’ Harcourt, Lars Klein, Roger ‘dodger’ Laird, Patricia ‘Mum’ Lauwers, Kathryn Newton, David ‘onion eater’ Philips, Kim Shaddick, Megan ‘Dr. Meg’ Storrie, Beth Symonds and Kara Yopak.

Macquarie University would have been a dull place without the people there and the friendships made. I would like to thank everyone in the Marine Mammal Research Group: Simon Allen, Kerstin Bilgmann, Rob Harcourt, Jennifer Kingston, Michelle Lemon, Charles Littnan, Luciana Möller, and Chicco ‘Crazy Chilean’ Viddi. From the Graduate School of the Environment, I also would like to thank Joy Monckton and Gunnella Murphy for answering all the questions I had including the most stupid ones and Tony Morrisson for his help with Endnote. The biology department and most particularly two labs were always there when I needed to procrastinate and go for a wander: David Raftos and his students Saleem Aladaileh, Ulysse Bove, Dan Butt, Alice Gleeson, Kathryn Newton and George ‘of the Jungle’ Wilson, and Luciano Beheregaray and his students Shannon Corrigan, Kim ‘Prickle’ Shaddick, Joanna ‘Jojo’ Wiszniewski.

In some way, I was not only part of the Marine Mammal Research Group, but I also adopted by two fantastic labs without which this Ph.D. candidature could have turned into an aimless project: the Bennett Lab from the University of Queensland, Brisbane and Terry’s incredible group from the Department of Primary Industries Victoria, Queenscliff. In particular, I would like to thank Mike Bennett, Peter ‘Mr. K’ Kyne, Andrea Marshall, Simon Pierce, Sebastien Prado, Joanna ‘Jojo’ Stead, Stephen ‘Stevey T.’ Taylor, and Tracey Scott-Holland for the Brisbane lab; and Justin ‘too weak for Charlie’ Bell, Matias ‘let’s go surfing’ Braccini, David ‘Little Dave’ Mossop, Matt ‘Schmeardo’ Reardon, Fabian ‘Pool Queue’ Trinnie, David Philips, Javier Tovar-Avila and Terry Walker from the Queenscliff lab.

I also had the opportunity to meet, exchange ideas and become friends with other chondrichthyan co-workers for which I am thankful: Heidi Ahonen, Cynthia Awruch, Victoria Brimms, Jonathan Daly, Sarah Irvine, Lindsay Marshall, Vic Peddemors, David Powter, Rob Ramos, Will Robbins, Adam Stow, Michelle Treloar, and Will White



Special thanks go to Rob Carraro and Justin Chidlow. Their early work on wobbegongs inspired me. Their thesis and advice greatly helped me throughout this project and saved me a large amount of time which would have otherwise been wasted in rediscovering what they already knew. Rachel 'Exxxxtreme' Cavanagh is thanked for inviting me to the deep-sea chondrichthyan and the South African workshop where I first met all the 'gurus' and when my Ph.D. really started.

Lastly, I'd like to thank a few people who have made my time in Australia the best years of my life. Thanks to them I have been able to say that every year gone past has been the best year of my life: Craig 'Crackers' Brand, Scott 'Enso' Ensby and Roger 'Ginger Ninja' Laird for giving me bonus Australian points, Wombat and Red for making me faint for the first time, Simo and Frenchy 'formerly known as Fatty' for being the greatest mates and always being there if I needed them, even if it is to drive over mobile phones, Sharkbait for waking me up in the morning, and the Brown family for allowing me to become their adopted son for the last 7 years and who were the first to show me the endless possibilities of living in Australia.



## Chapter acknowledgments

When I first started this Ph.D. thesis, each chapter seemed like an impossible task. However, the support of many people greatly helped in the completion of each chapter. But first I would like to thank Simon Allen for his proof reading skills that I have used and abused throughout this project and Lindsay Marshall for her fantastic drawings.

The redescrptions of *O. halei* and *O. ornatus* were undertaken through the guidance of Peter ‘Scary’ Last, and advice from Will White and Brett Human. Paula Lam, Georgie and Oliver helped undertaking some morphometric and meristic measurements. Curators and staff of various collections also helped in obtaining the relevant specimens and included Mark McGrouther and Tom Trnski from the Australian Museum, Alastair Graham from the CSIRO Marine and Atmospheric Research collection, and Jeff Johnson from the Queensland Museum. Peter Bull and Carl Bento helped in obtaining X-rays of the specimens for vertebrae counts, Will White, Brett ‘Bert Humanoid’ Human, Peter Kyne and Megan Storrie provided comments on earlier version of the chapter

The tagging and movement chapter was undertaken around Fish Rock close to South West Rocks thanks to the help of South West Rock Dive Centre and particularly Peter, Nick and Kevin Hitchins and John Nelson, as well as their late father Noel Hitchins. The receivers and helped building the tags were provided by Barry Bruce and Russ Bradford from CSIRO Marine and Atmospheric Research. Trial of the feasibility of a tagging study in South West Rocks was undertaken with the help of Ally Farley from Fish Rock Dive Centre who reported sightings of tagged shark weekly. Macquarie Engineering and Technical Services (METS) provided me with the tagging tips free of charge whereas Hallprint provided me with some free samples to trial. Alan Taylor helped with data manipulation and analysis, whereas Corey Green helped with the Fourier analysis.

The distribution and relative abundance chapter would have never been possible without the involvement of all the recreational divers who participated in the project and are too numerous to cite individually. In particular, I would like to thank Sue Newson and Steve Walsh for their high

number of survey filled. Kehui Luo provided advice with on the statistical analysis of this chapter.

I would like to thank Sue Gibbs for identifying otoliths and cephalopod beaks for the diet chapter. Margaret Platell provided advice on how to use Primer and interpret results obtained and Matias Braccini helped during the first stage of data analysis.

Terry Walker greatly helped in the reproduction chapter by providing finances needed to obtain sharks from southern NSW, and also by helping with the analysis and writing of the chapter.

The age and growth chapter contained many different sections which required the involvement of multiple persons. I would like to thank Oceanworld Manly, Sydney Aquarium and Melbourne Aquarium in particular, Ben Brewer, Rodd Stapley, Colin Henrisson, Amish Tristran, Bryde Killen who sacrificed her hand for the sake of science, and Nick Kirby for keeping wobbegongs for me and allowing me to measure them monthly. Jonathan Daly and his supervisor David Galloway were very helpful in obtaining sharks for the Melbourne Aquarium and allowing me to sacrifice them to attempt validation. Tracey helped in the preliminary counts of growth bands and Vic Peddemors provided me with software to help photo-identification of wobbegongs measured monthly. Thanks to Debra Birch and Nicole Vella from the Macquarie University Microscopy Unit for their help with the equipment. This chapter was my most difficult chapter and the help and direction provided by the staff from the Centre of Ageing Facility, Queenscliff played a great part of helping me keeping sane. Special thanks go to Corey 'lucky' Green and Simon 'crossbow' Robertson for all the help provided, the use of CAF equipments, the laughs, and most importantly for putting up with me, all my questions and cries for help. I would also like to thank Ken Goldman and Wade Smith for enlightening conversations about my somehow confusing data. Finally, Terry Walker once again helped with the interpretation of the counts and bore the cost of mounting vertebrae on thin sections.

## **Dedication**

To mum... for the education given and enabling me to be where I am  
now.

