



ONCE UPON A TIME WE HAD

Sharks

*Human beings may be adversely affecting biodiversity, but can we be a help as well as a hindrance? **Greg Nowell** writes.*

Marine life once thrived in the waters surrounding the Maltese islands, sharks included. But that is no longer the reality we see today. So, what happened? Where have all the fish gone? How can we bring them back?

The word shark typically conjures up images of a large, dangerous, sharp-toothed animal with more interest in causing harm than good. In reality, of the 35 species historically or currently documented in Malta, only one fits part of that description and even then, it would still prefer to have nothing to do with us humans.

The simple truth is that humans have hunted sharks for food and killed them for sport, all without considering potential consequences. Regrettably then, we have removed a key factor in maintaining a healthy, diverse, and balanced marine ecosystem around the Maltese islands.

Despite only some sharks being classed as top predators, all play a crucial role in maintaining a healthy marine ecosystem by feeding on a huge variety of marine species. Some target the injured

and sick, in turn keeping their prey populations healthy. By targeting sharks, the balance is destroyed.

So what can we do to change things back to how they should be? In truth, this will be very difficult for a number of reasons. Sharks are cartilaginous fishes and differ greatly from bony fish since they are very slow to mature and only produce few offspring—on average, maturity can take between eight and 15 years. Overfishing has also contributed to the drop in numbers. Without food, no predatory animal is likely to re-establish itself in areas it once used to frequent.

To make a significant change, we must stop abusing the waters around our islands. Proper regulations and enforcement are essential, together with a long-term practical plan. Current safe areas need to be expanded and safeguarded to provide a real refuge where marine life can flourish.

Once upon a time sharks roamed freely: plentiful and uninhibited by the misunderstandings of the human animal. If we want a healthy, diverse, rich sea around our islands, we need to reduce exploitation and welcome them back. **T**

