



© R. Field

Ray leather for the watch industry

Rays are elegant fish that "fly" through our oceans and attract thousands of divers. But increasingly, rays also are worn—as watch straps, hand bags, or shoes.

Rays are extremely sensitive to polluted oceans and overfishing, and their growing exploitation for the production of leather goods puts further pressure on them.

Despite the fact that rays are among the most threatened animal species in Europe, they do not enjoy any protection whatsoever. Unregulated fishing only adds to the rapid depletion of the populations.

Since the watch industry processes a substantial portion of the harvested ray leather, it is in a strong position to demand concrete and tangible measures to protect these species—established mechanisms to ensure sustainable use among them.

Rays are special fish

Rays are fish and belong, along with sharks, to the class of the cartilaginous fish. Their skeletons do not consist of bone material—as do humans’—but of cartilage. Most ray species dwell in the ocean, but some can be found in rivers. They eat small animals and are innocuous to humans; one exception being the stingray, which possesses a poisonous thorn on its tail, to use as an efficient means of defense.

Like sharks, rays grow slowly, reach sexual maturity late and have few offspring after a long gestation period. As a result of this life cycle they are very sensitive to overfishing, from which they recover very slowly or not at all. The number of sustainably fishable cartilaginous fish is, therefore, much

smaller than that of bony fish. The later often occur in large schools and can produce a lot of offspring in a short period. Nevertheless, even those species have been overexploited in recent years.

In the past, rays have often been caught unintentionally (“bycatch”). Nowadays more and more ray species also are targeted specifically for their leather.



© R. Field

Spotted eagle ray (*Aetobatus narinari*)

Red List 2006: Near threatened

Red List 2000: Data deficient

This large ray species is particularly popular with divers. Eagle rays live in the warm waters of the Indopacific and the East and West Atlantic. Due to overfishing, their numbers are in severe decline. Today the leather industry advertises eagle ray leather.

Devil fish (*Mobula mobular*)

Red List 2006: Endangered

Red List 2000: Vulnerable

This species is particularly vulnerable due to its limited distribution (Mediterranean and Black Sea) and its low rate of reproduction. It often is an unintended victim of the industrial fishery. Today the hide of manta rays is advertised on the Internet.



© T. Zuberbühler

The Red List

The fact that most ray species do not figure on the Red List of endangered species does not mean that their exploitation is without problems. The Red List registers only species that have been evaluated. If a species has not been assessed, it will not be registered. To date, only 202 of the approximately 600 known ray species have been evaluated. We don't know how many of the remaining 400 species are endangered or on the brink of extinction. Furthermore an entry on the Red List alone doesn't guarantee that a species will be protected—it's just a first step in the right direction. The Red List is released every two years by the World Conservation Union IUCN (see www.redlist.org).

CITES – Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species

It's only through domestic laws or international conventions like CITES that a protected status can be regulated. If the CITES authorities determine that a species is endangered by international trade, they will put trade controls in place or forbid commerce altogether. There are no management plans or catch regulations whatsoever applicable to rays.

Given that voluntary agreements on the protection of cartilaginous fish have proven ineffective, the CITES working group for sharks and rays has recommended measures to obtain trade statistics. The EU wants to take more rigorous measures to protect these species, which means that the watch industry may soon need import and export permits for the trade in ray leather.

Marine Stewardship Council (MSC)

For responsible fishing practices

In order to protect rays from overfishing and impending extinction, precautionary measures must be taken. The Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) ensures that fish populations are being utilized sustainably, thereby guaranteeing their continued survival and facilitating sustainable trade.

You can assist in the protection of rays in two important ways:

Avoid using ray leather from nonsustainable fishery.

Make sure that the ray leather is from an MSC-certified fishery¹ (refer to www.msc.org for details).



Close-up view of ray leather

A. M. Biondo

¹No MSC-certified ray fisheries currently exist.



© P. Kay

Common skate (*Dipturus batis*)

Red List 2006: Critically endangered

Red List 2000: Endangered

The common skate is the largest ray species in European waters and used to be widespread. Today it has disappeared from the Mediterranean Sea and the Northeast Atlantic due to overfishing. Its eggs are so large that even they are caught in fishing nets.