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LIFE HISTORIES OF COMMERCIALY IMPORTANT TROPICAL
SHARKS FROM THE GREAT BARRIER REEF WORLD HERITAGE
AREA

Thesis submitted by
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in August 2011

For the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in the School of Earth & Environmental Sciences
James Cook University
Townsville



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Jenny Ovenden, Jessica Morgan & Raewyn Street (Department of Employment, Economic Development and Innovation, Queensland)

- Molecular analysis of blacktip shark samples (Chapter 5)

Julia Davies and Jason Stapley (Department of Employment, Economic Development and Innovation, Queensland)

- Fisheries observer data for the Queensland East Coast Inshore Finfish Fishery (Chapter 2)

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- Raw fecundity data for hammerhead sharks from the Queensland Shark Control Program (Chapter 7)

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- Vertebrae samples and reproductive data from 43 *S. lewini* and 12 *S. mokarran* (Chapter 4)

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- Vertebrae samples from one *S. lewini* and one *S. mokarran* (Chapter 4)

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- Vertebrae samples from one *S. mokarran* (Chapter 4)

Adrian Gutteridge (University of Queensland)

- Vertebrae and reproductive samples from fourteen *S. lewini* and seven *S. mokarran* including an individual injected with calcein for age validation (Chapter 4)

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PRESENTATION OF RESEARCH FROM THIS THESIS

Research from this thesis was presented at the following conferences or forums:

- 2008. Poster presentation, Oceania Chondrichthyan Society. “Reproductive biology of Queensland’s tropical inshore Carcharhiniformes. Preliminary findings on six commercially important species and a comparison with northern Australian populations.”
- 2008. Oral presentation. School of Earth & Environmental Sciences Postgraduate Research Conference. “The life of the scalloped hammerhead, *Sphyrna lewini*, in Queensland waters.”
- 2009. Oral presentation. School of Earth & Environmental Sciences seminar series. “The life history of hammerhead sharks in the GBRWHA.”
- 2009. Oral presentation. 8th Indo Pacific Fish Conference. “The life history of two hammerhead species in the GBRWHA.”
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

STATEMENT OF ACCESS	I
STATEMENT OF SOURCES.....	II
CONTRIBUTIONS OF OTHERS TO THIS THESIS	III
PUBLICATIONS ARISING FROM THIS THESIS	V
PRESENTATION OF RESEARCH FROM THIS THESIS	VII
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	VIII
TABLE OF CONTENTS	X
LIST OF TABLES.....	XIV
LIST OF FIGURES.....	XVII
LIST OF PLATES	XXI
ABSTRACT	1
CHAPTER 1. GENERAL INTRODUCTION.....	5
1.1 INTRODUCTION.....	6
1.2 PROJECT STRUCTURE AND OBJECTIVES	8
1.3 SOURCE OF DATA.....	10
1.4 THESIS OUTLINE	10
CHAPTER 2. EVALUATING CATCH AND MITIGATING RISK IN A MULTI- SPECIES, TROPICAL, INSHORE SHARK FISHERY WITHIN THE GBRWHA	13
2.1 INTRODUCTION.....	14
2.2 METHODS	16
2.2.1 <i>Fishery observer program</i>	16
2.2.2 <i>Fishery zones</i>	17
2.2.3 <i>Data analysis</i>	17
2.3 RESULTS.....	18
2.3.1 <i>Fishery observer survey</i>	18
2.3.2 <i>Spatial distribution of fishing effort</i>	18
2.3.3 <i>Catch composition</i>	19
2.3.4 <i>Catch characteristics</i>	20
2.4 DISCUSSION.....	21
2.4.1 <i>Capture susceptibility and threats to carcharhiniform sharks in the GBRWHA</i>	21
2.4.2 <i>Risk mitigation strategies in multi-species, tropical shark fisheries</i>	22
2.5 CONCLUSIONS	25

**CHAPTER 3. IMPROVING AGE, GROWTH, AND MATURITY ESTIMATES FOR
ASEASONALLY REPRODUCING CHONDRICHTHYANS 35**

3.1 INTRODUCTION.....	36
3.2 METHODS.....	38
3.2.1 <i>Sample collection</i>	38
3.2.2 <i>Vertebral processing and analysis</i>	39
3.2.3 <i>Verification of growth band periodicity</i>	41
3.2.4 <i>Investigating the effects of aseasonal reproduction on modelling growth</i>	42
3.2.5 <i>Maturity analysis</i>	43
3.3 RESULTS.....	44
3.3.1 <i>Centrum morphology</i>	44
3.3.2 <i>Precision and bias in age estimation</i>	44
3.3.3 <i>Verification of growth band periodicity</i>	45
3.4 <i>Examining the effect of an aseasonal reproductive cycle on growth and maturity</i>	45
3.4 DISCUSSION.....	47
3.5 CONCLUSIONS	50

**CHAPTER 4. THE LIFE HISTORY OF ENDANGERED HAMMERHEAD SHARKS
(CARCHARHINIFORMES, SPHYRNIDAE) FROM THE EAST COAST OF
AUSTRALIA 63**

4.1 INTRODUCTION.....	64
4.2 METHODS.....	65
4.2.1 <i>Sample collection</i>	65
4.2.2 <i>Vertebral processing and growth analysis</i>	66
4.2.3 <i>Spatial variation in growth of male <i>S. lewini</i></i>	68
4.2.4 <i>Age validation and verification</i>	69
4.2.5 <i>Duration of first growth increment</i>	69
4.2.6 <i>Maturity and reproduction</i>	70
4.3 RESULTS.....	70
4.3.1 <i>Sample collection and length equations</i>	70
4.3.2 <i>Validation of growth band pattern</i>	71
4.3.3 <i>Duration of first growth increment</i>	72
4.3.4 <i>Precision and bias in age estimation</i>	73
4.3.5 <i>Growth analysis</i>	73
4.3.6 <i>Maturity analysis</i>	75

4.3.7 <i>Notes on reproductive cycle and length-at-birth</i>	76
4.4 DISCUSSION.....	76
4.4.1 <i>Life history of Sphyrna lewini</i>	76
4.4.2 <i>Life history of Sphyrna mokarran</i>	81
4.5 CONCLUSIONS	82
CHAPTER 5. VERTEBRAL COUNTS HIGHLIGHT A DISPARITY IN CURRENT GENETIC METHODS USED TO DISTINGUISH BETWEEN THE MORPHOLOGICALLY SIMILAR AUSTRALIAN BLACKTIP SHARK AND COMMON BLACKTIP SHARK.....	99
5.0 RESEARCH NOTE.....	100
CHAPTER 6. AGE, GROWTH, AND REPRODUCTIVE BIOLOGY OF TWO COMMERCIALY IMPORTANT SHARKS FROM THE GREAT BARRIER REEF WORLD HERITAGE AREA.....	113
6.1 INTRODUCTION.....	114
6.1.1 <i>Fishery exploitation</i>	114
6.1.2 <i>Current state of knowledge</i>	115
6.1.3 <i>Aims</i>	116
6.2 METHODS.....	116
6.2.1 <i>Sample collection and species identification</i>	116
6.2.2 <i>Vertebral processing and growth analysis</i>	117
6.2.3 <i>Age validation</i>	118
6.2.4 <i>Reproductive biology</i>	119
6.2.5 <i>Length-weight relationship</i>	119
6.2.6 <i>Maturity and maternity analysis</i>	119
6.2.7 <i>Fecundity and embryonic sex ratio</i>	120
6.2.8 <i>Timing of reproduction and embryonic growth analysis</i>	120
6.3 RESULTS.....	121
6.3.1 <i>Sample collection and species identification</i>	121
6.3.2 <i>Age validation</i>	121
6.3.3 <i>Precision and bias in age estimation</i>	122
6.3.4 <i>Vertebral growth analysis</i>	122
6.3.5 <i>Length-weight relationship</i>	123
6.3.6 <i>Maturity and maternity ogives</i>	124

6.3.7 <i>Fecundity and sex ratio</i>	124
6.3.8 <i>Timing of reproduction and embryonic growth analysis</i>	125
6.4 DISCUSSION.....	127
6.4.1 <i>Carcharhinus sorrah</i>	127
6.4.2 <i>Carcharhinus tilstoni</i>	129
6.4.3 <i>Intraspecific differences; real or methodological?</i>	131
6.4.4 <i>Reproductive strategy</i>	133
6.5 CONCLUSION.....	134
CHAPTER 7. EVALUATING THE PERILS AND POSSIBILITIES ASSOCIATED WITH SEX-BIASED HARVESTING OF WIDELY DISTRIBUTED SHARKS.....	155
7.1 INTRODUCTION.....	156
7.2 METHODS.....	158
7.2.1 <i>Conceptual model of sex segregation in S. lewini</i>	158
7.2.2 <i>Matrix population model</i>	159
7.2.3 <i>Life history data</i>	160
7.2.4 <i>Age and growth</i>	160
7.2.5 <i>Maturity</i>	161
7.2.6 <i>Fecundity and timing of reproduction</i>	161
7.2.7 <i>Survival</i>	162
7.2.8 <i>Quantitative evaluation of sex-biased harvesting</i>	162
7.3 RESULTS.....	162
7.3.1 <i>Survival</i>	162
7.3.2 <i>Population model for S. lewini</i>	163
7.3.3 <i>Incorporating sex-biased harvest</i>	163
7.3.4 <i>Comparing the effects of sex-biased harvesting</i>	164
7.4 DISCUSSION.....	165
7.4.1 <i>Viability of sex-biased harvesting for managing sharks</i>	165
CHAPTER 8. GENERAL DISCUSSION	179
8.1 THE ROLE OF LIFE HISTORY STUDIES IN MANAGING SHARK POPULATIONS	180
8.2 FISHERY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	182
8.4 FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS.....	184
REFERENCES	189

LIST OF TABLES

<i>Table 2.1. Nominal fishery zones in the East Coast Inshore Finfish Fishery</i>	28
<i>Table 2.2. Total fishing effort observed from 2006–2009. The observer coverage was the most comprehensive fisheries observer program ever applied to the ECIFF, and included considerable coverage of fishing in river and intertidal zones, the most data-poor sectors of the fishery</i>	29
<i>Table 2.3. Catch composition of elasmobranchs caught by the East Coast Inshore Finfish Fishery in the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area. Data, grouped by order and sorted by numerical abundance, are from all 149 trips observed across the three nominal zones (river, intertidal, and inshore coastal). The dominance of carcharhiniform sharks in the elasmobranch component of the catch is typical of many tropical, inshore fisheries</i>	30
<i>Table 2.4. Catch per unit effort and catch composition of carcharhiniform sharks. Species are sorted by the proportion of the total observed catch across all habitats by weight. Data are from a subsample of 126 observer trips where all individuals were identified to species level. Blank records indicate no recorded occurrence in catch</i>	32
<i>Table 2.5. Tabulation of sex-specific length at capture details, sex ratio and the percentage of catch mature or neonate. The results of Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests comparing length frequency distributions of males and females and chi-squared tests on the sex ratio of the catch are also given. Where only a single length measurement was available it was given as maximum size at capture and other fields were left blank</i>	33
<i>Table 2.6. Groupings of similarly susceptible shark species caught in the East Coast Inshore Finfish Fishery</i>	34
<i>Table 3.1 Set of growth models used for multi-model inference, following Thorson and Simpfendorfer (2009)</i>	59
<i>Table 3.2 Results of the multi-model inference analysis of growth using three different values for the age at first band (AAFB). The performance of candidate models is ranked based on their AIC_c values. k is the total number of estimated parameters plus 1 for variance, Δ is the Akaike difference, and $w\%$ is the percentage Akaike weight.</i>	60
<i>Table 3.3 Best fit parameter estimates for all models in each analysis of growth. Corresponding parameters are found in Table 3.1.</i>	61
<i>Table 4.1 Recapture details of five calcein-marked <i>Sphyrna mokarran</i> at liberty for 126 – 467 days. Two individuals at liberty for 353 and 467 days formed a single band pair, supportive of an annual cycle for band pair deposition in this species.</i>	93
<i>Table 4.2 Summary of five a priori growth models fitted to length-at-age data for two species of hammerhead shark. Models are ranked in terms of performance (best to worst with the best in bold) based on computed values of small-sample, bias-adjusted Akaike's Information Criteria (AIC_c). Akaike differences (Δ) and Akaike weights (w) show the relative support for other models. The number of parameters in each model (+1 for variance) is given by K.</i>	94

Table 4.3 Best fit parameter estimates (with 95% CI) in preferred growth models for two species of hammerhead shark. Parameters are asymptotic length (L_{∞}), length at birth (L_0) and growth completion rate (k). The sample size of each analysis is given by N95

Table 4.4 Hypothesis testing for the effect of region on von Bertalanffy growth parameters for male *Sphyrna lewini*. Four hypotheses (H1–H4) were tested against the null hypothesis (H0) using likelihood ratio tests, where LL is the computed negative log-likelihood for a model, χ^2 is test statistic, d.f. is the degrees of freedom and P is the probability of significance.96

Table 4.5 Summary of logistic regression analysis of length- and age-at-maturity stage for two species of hammerhead shark. The effects of the factors sex and region (tropical and temperate) on maturity stage were also examined, and the best model was chosen as the one that minimised the small-sample, bias-adjusted form of Akaike's Information Criteria (AIC_c). Akaike differences (Δ), Akaike weights (w), residual deviance and residual degrees of freedom show the relative performance of competing models. K is the number of estimated regression parameters. The models with the most support are in bold.97

Table 4.6 Summary of preferred logistic regression models used to determine length- and age-at-maturity of two species of hammerhead shark. Parameter values (with 95% CI) are given for the logistic regression model $P(x) = \frac{1}{1 + \exp(a + bx)}$, where $P(x)$ is the proportion of individuals mature at a given length or age x , and a and b are fitted regression coefficients. L_{ST50} and A_{50} (with 95% CI) are populations estimates of stretch total length (mm) and age (years) at 50% maturity, n is the number of mature animals, and N is the total number of animals.98

Table 5.1 Tabulation of agreements between vertebral and genetic identification methods.112

Table 6.1 Set of candidate models chosen for analysis of growth where length, L , is a function of time, t . Parameter β_1 , common to all models, is asymptotic length (L_{∞}) in mm and L_0 is length at birth in mm. All other parameters are not directly comparable.148

Table 6.2 Indices used for staging reproductive condition, adapted from Walker (2005) Criteria for classing mature and immature condition149

Table 6.3 Recapture details of six calcein marked *Carcharhinus sorrah*150

Table 6.4 Comparison of six growth models fitted to length-at-age data for two species of carcharhinid shark. The best model (in bold) was the one with the lowest value for Akaike's Information Criteria (AIC). The relative support of other models can be gauged based on Akaike differences (Δ), Akaike weights (w) and residual standard error (R.S.E.). K is the number of estimated parameters, +1 for variance. Best-fit estimates are given for parameters β_1 – β_5 (with 95% CI) as described in Table 6.1.151

Table 6.5 Length-at-maturity and length-at-maternity sample sizes for *Carcharhinus sorrah*. A male was classed in mature condition if the clasper was rigid and fully calcified ($C=3$); otherwise it was classed as immature. A female was classed in mature condition if the uterus was uniformly enlarged and tubular in structure ($U \geq 3$); otherwise it was class as non-mature. A female was classed as in maternal condition if $U \geq 4$ or $U > 3$ if the largest ovarian follicle diameter was >10 mm between January and March; otherwise it was classed as in non-maternal condition.152

<i>Table 6.6 Length-at-maturity and length-at-maternity sample sizes for <i>Carcharhinus tilstoni</i>. A male was classed in mature condition if the clasper was rigid and fully calcified ($C=3$); otherwise it was classed as immature. A female was classed in mature condition if the uterus was uniformly enlarged and tubular in structure ($U \geq 3$); otherwise it was class as non-mature. A female was classed as in maternal condition if $U \geq 4$ or $U > 3$ if the largest ovarian follicle diameter was >10 mm between January and March; otherwise it was classed as in non-maternal condition.....</i>	<i>153</i>
<i>Table 6.7 Hypothesis testing for the effect of sex on length- and age-at-maturity. Analysis of deviance tables testing for a significant effect of sex and its interaction on STL and age.....</i>	<i>154</i>
<i>Table 7.1 Values for life history parameters used to create demographic models for scalloped hammerhead, <i>Sphyrna lewini</i>.</i>	<i>175</i>
<i>Table 7.2 Estimates of mortality rates (yr^{-1}) from seven empirical methods.....</i>	<i>176</i>
<i>Table 7.3 Description of three fishery scenarios and the level of harvest (plus confidence intervals) required by each one to maintain a stationary population growth rate</i>	<i>177</i>
<i>Table 8.1 Intrinsic rebound potential of sharks caught in the Queensland East Coast Inshore Finfish Fishery. α is age at 50% maturity, w is maximum longevity, b is mean number of female pups born annually, M is natural mortality based on the method of Jensen 1996 (1.6 k), $l_{\alpha 2M}$ is survival to maturity when survival = $2M$, and r_{2M} is intrinsic rebound potential (at 1.00b). Data are sorted by decreasing r_{2M} values.....</i>	<i>188</i>

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2.1. Study area showing observed fishing effort (km-net-hours) by one degree squares of latitude and longitude. Within each square observed effort is shown for the three zones: inshore (upper left), intertidal (centre), and river (bottom right). The dashed black line indicates the outer boundary of the GBRHWA.....	26
Figure 2.2. Length frequency distributions of the top 10 carcharhiniform sharks by weight (Table 2.4). Bar colour denotes the capture zone: solid black, river; dark grey, inshore; and light grey, intertidal. Length at 50% maturity is denoted by the dashed black line.....	27
Figure 3.1 Map showing the study region. Sampling locations are denoted by crosses.	51
Figure 3.2 Sectioned vertebrae centrum from an 854 mm mature male <i>Rhizoprionodon acutus</i> with four growth band pairs visible. The white line is an example of a transect through the corpus calcareum used for back-calculation, showing the focus (F), birth-mark (B) and growth band-pairs (1-4). The centrum radius (CR) is the distance from F to CR. The distance from B to 1 is the first growth increment (FGI). ...	52
Figure 3.3 Age bias plot incorporating age-specific agreements between Reading 1 and 2 used for Bowker's test of symmetry. Mean age-specific agreements ± 2 standard errors are plotted along with the 1-1 equivalence line for comparison. The coefficient of variation between reads was 22.08%.	53
Figure 3.4 Mean relative marginal increment (RMI) ± 2 standard errors. Sample size for each month is shown at the top of the graph	54
Figure 3.5 Growth analysis using back-calculated data for 71 female (n=196), and 160 male (n=507) <i>Rhizoprionodon acutus</i> . Points are size-at-age data with an unadjusted AAFB for females (a) and males (b), a mean adjusted AAFB (c) and (d) and individual-adjusted AAFB (e) and (f). Curves are model-averaged estimates of growth from 5 growth models fit to size-at-age datasets and weighted using AIC values.....	55
Figure 3.6 Length and age at maturity ogives fitted to maturity stage data for females: (a) and (c), and males: (b) and (d). Curves in (c) and (d) are results from different methods used to analyse growth: unadjusted (....), mean adjusted (---) and individual-adjusted (—) analyses. Brackets (slightly offset for age) are 95% bootstrap confidence intervals of the $L_{0.5}$ and $A_{0.5}$ estimates. Estimates of length and age at 50% maturity ($\pm 95\%$ CI) are:	56
Figure 3.7 Histograms of back-calculated first growth increment (mm) for (a) females and (b) males. Solid lines are cumulative normal distributions. Dashed lines indicate the 97.5 th percentiles of the normal distribution. This value was taken as the upper limit for first year growth.	57
Figure 3.8 Comparison of the three model-averaged growth curves for (a) female and (b) male <i>Rhizoprionodon acutus</i> . Curves are unadjusted (....), mean-adjusted (---), and individual-adjusted (—) methods of analysing growth.....	58
Figure 4.1 Location of the study area showing sampling locations of <i>Sphyrna lewini</i> (○) and <i>Sphyrna mokarran</i> (●) off eastern Australia. Apparent spatial differences in growth and maturity of male <i>S. lewini</i>	

were examined by including region as a factor in growth and maturity analyses. Region was a two level factor (tropic and temperate) with samples separated into the two nominal regions by the Tropic of Capricorn.84

Figure 4.2 Sectioned vertebrae centrum from an 1145 mm L_{ST} male *Sphyrna lewini* with two growth band pairs visible (a), and a 2598 mm L_{ST} male *Sphyrna mokarran* with nine growth band pairs visible (b). The vertebrae centrum in (b) is from individual GHH4 (Table 4.1) that was injected with calcein and recaptured after 467 days at liberty. Translucent bands on the vertebrae are denoted by ● and the calcein mark denoted by ●. Age 0 corresponds to the birth mark.85

Figure 4.3 Length-frequency distributions of (a) *Sphyrna lewini* ($n = 518$) and (b) *Sphyrna mokarran* ($n = 142$) specimens collected off eastern Australia between December 2005 and May 2010. Bar colour denotes capture location: tropic ■ or temperate ■.86

Figure 4.4 Monthly proportions of opaque bands present on the outer margin of vertebrae centra for *Sphyrna lewini*. Total sample sizes in each month are denoted by numbers above bars. Open circles indicate the best-fit model suggesting an annual cycle of band formation.87

Figure 4.5 Occurrence and length of age 0 individuals (●), neonates (○), and near-term embryos (●) throughout the year, used to determine the duration of the first growth increment.88

Figure 4.6 Inter- and intra-reader age-bias plots for *Sphyrna lewini* (a–b) and *Sphyrna mokarran* (c–d).89

Figure 4.7 Length-at-age determined by vertebral analysis for *Sphyrna lewini* (a–b) and *Sphyrna mokarran* (d). Solid lines are fitted von Bertalanffy growth models and dashed lines in (a) and (d) are 95% confidence intervals. Approximate confidence intervals for the spatial comparison of male *S. lewini* growth in (b) are provided in (c) and highlight the difference in growth rate, k , and L_{∞} parameters.90

Figure 4.8 Length- and age-at-maturity ogives for *Sphyrna lewini* in tropical and temperate waters (a–d) and *Sphyrna mokarran* from all latitudes sampled (e–f) during this study. Solid lines are the expected proportion of population mature at a given length and dashed lines are 95% confidence intervals. Rug plots indicate observed data points.91

Figure 4.9 Synthesis of life history data from published studies on hammerheads indicating (a) how maximum length predicts length at maturity in male hammerhead sharks (where ○ denotes *S. lewini* and ● denotes all other hammerhead species), and (b) a comparison of all growth estimates for both sexes when growth bands pairs are assumed to be formed annually. Grey lines in (b) are original growth trajectories in studies that have assumed biannual growth band deposition.92

Figure 5.1 Length frequency of individuals that were identified by counting the number of pre-caudal vertebrae. Vertebral counts were obtained directly from most individuals □ although the identity of eight pregnant females □ was also inferred from counting the vertebrae of 25 developing embryos □.108

Figure 5.2 Number of pre-caudal vertebrae in 191 post-natal (□) and 21 pre-natal individuals (□).109

Figure 5.3 A comparison of length-at-birth frequency distributions obtained using the two identification methods. Individuals identified as *Carcharhinus tilstoni* are denoted by □ and those identified as *C.*

limbatus are denoted by □. Based on vertebral identification methods (a), length-at-birth distributions showed a clear separation, however this was not seen when using genetic methods (b).110

Figure 5.4 The contrasting length at-maturity of *Carcharhinus tilstoni* and *C. limbatus* based on male clasper length (a–c) and female uterus stage (d–f). The red arrows highlight the separation of the two species into distinct groups that occurs because *C. tilstoni* matures at a much smaller length than *C. limbatus*. While vertebral identification methods were consistent with these groupings, genetic methods showed some inconsistencies (red circles).111

Figure 6.1 Length frequency distributions of male (light grey) and female (dark grey) samples used in the present study for *Carcharhinus sorrah* (a) and *C. tilstoni* (b).137

Figure 6.2 Intra-reader age-bias plots for *Carcharhinus sorrah* (a) and *C. tilstoni* (b) incorporating age-specific agreements used for Bowker’s test of symmetry. Mean age-specific agreements ± 2 standard errors (●) are plotted alongside the 1-1 equivalence line for comparison (---). CV is Chang’s coefficient of variation.138

Figure 6.3 Length-at-age of *Carcharhinus sorrah* (a – c) and *C. tilstoni* (d – f) determined from vertebral growth analysis. Plots are mean STL at age (—) with 95% confidence intervals (---) and raw data (●), where mean values were computed using the preferred growth model selected from a candidate set of six based on AIC values.139

Figure 6.4 Relationships between total body mass and stretched total length of sharks. Plots are mean total body mass against STL (—), with 95% confidence intervals (---), 95% prediction intervals (----) and raw data (●) for (a) *Carcharhinus sorrah* and (b) *C. tilstoni*. Values of parameters and statistical quantities from linear regression analysis to derive the equation $Wl = \beta_1 l \beta_2$ are given in the following tabulation:140

Figure 6.5 Length- and age-at-maturity and -maternity for *Carcharhinus sorrah* (a – f) and *C. tilstoni* (g – l). Proportion of both sexes mature or females in maternal condition against STL (—), with 95% confidence intervals (---). Values of parameters and statistical quantities for the equations $P_l = (1 + \exp(-\ln(19)(l - \beta_1)/(\beta_2 - \beta_1))) - 1$ and $P_a = (1 + \exp(-\ln(19)(a - \beta_1)/(\beta_2 - \beta_1))) - 1$ are given in the following tabulation:141

Figure 6.6 Number of in utero embryos against maternal STL. Plots are mean number of embryos against STL (—), with 95% confidence intervals (---), 95% prediction intervals (----) and raw data (●) for (a) *Carcharhinus sorrah* and (b) *C. tilstoni*. Values of parameters and statistical quantities for the linear regression $F_l = \beta_1 + \beta_2 l$ are given in the following tabulation:143

Figure 6.7 Largest follicle diameter (LFD) against day of year for (a) *Carcharhinus sorrah* and (b) *C. tilstoni*. Plots are raw data for each of the four adult female uterus stages: $U = 3$ (●); $U = 4$ (○); $U = 5$ (●); and $U = 6$ (●).144

Figure 6.8 Mean embryo length against day of year for (a) *Carcharhinus sorrah* and (b) *C. tilstoni*, and (c) a comparison of mean embryonic growth rate and mean daily temperature against month. Plots (a) and (b) are mean embryonic STL at age (—) and raw data (●). Plot (c) is mean embryonic growth rate throughout

the gestation period for <i>C. sorrah</i> (—) and <i>C. tilstoni</i> (—) and mean daily temperature (---). Values of parameters and statistical quantities for the non-linear regression.....	145
Figure 6.9 Relationships between in utero total body mass and stretched total length of embryonic sharks. Plots are mean total body mass against STL (—), with 95% confidence intervals (---), 95% prediction intervals (----) and raw data (●) for (a) <i>Carcharhinus sorrah</i> and (b) <i>C. tilstoni</i> . Values of parameters and statistical quantities from linear regression analysis to derive the equation $WL = \beta_1 l \beta_2$ are given in the following tabulation:	146
Figure 6.10 A comparison of growth curves derived from vertebral ageing of <i>Carcharhinus sorrah</i> and <i>C. tilstoni</i> from the GBRWHA (—) in the present study and from the Arafura Sea (---) by Davenport and Stevens (1988).	147
Figure 7.1 Conceptual model of sexual segregation for <i>Sphyrna lewini</i> (a), showing how the length of an individual is a function of depth, and that this varies by sex. Red components represent mature individuals. Mean length-at-depth information for <i>S. lewini</i> in coastal waters off eastern Australia is used to provide an empirical illustration of the model (b). In waters <25m depth the relationship appears to be non-linear. 169	
Figure 7.2 Statistical distributions and values of life history parameters used to create a stochastic, age structured population model for <i>Sphyrna lewini</i> . Black diamonds in (a,b and d) represent observed values of life history parameters from the primary literature. Black circles in (e) are observed data points used to establish the relationship between maternal length and fecundity in eastern Australian waters, while dashed lines represent published relationships of fecundity for <i>S. lewini</i> from other parts of the world. Mean age-specific survival (\pm s.d.) is given in (f).	170
Figure 7.3 Statistical distributions of demographic parameters for unharvested <i>Sphyrna lewini</i> using Monte Carlo simulation run 1000 times. Error bars in (e) and (f) are one standard deviation.	171
Figure 7.4 Mean fecundity, juvenile survival and adult survival elasticities from 1000 population models of <i>Sphyrna lewini</i> . Error bars are one standard deviation.	172
Figure 7.5 Age-frequency histograms for males (light grey) and females (dark grey) showing age classes of <i>Sphyrna lewini</i> available to three commercial fisheries in the Indo-Australia region.	173
Figure 7.6 Response of population growth rate to harvest levels between 0 and 1 in three fishery scenarios (Table 2.3). Red lines indicate the mean value based on 1000 Monte Carlo simulations. Horizontal lines ($\lambda = 1$) indicate when population growth rates becomes negative.	174
Figure 8.1. Intrinsic rebound potential (r_{2M}) of sharks caught by the Queensland East Coast Inshore Finfish Fishery as a function of age at maturity. Black points represent rebound potentials calculated for other species from Smith et al. (1998) and Simpfendorfer and Kyne (2009).	187

LIST OF PLATES

<i>Plate 1. Dawn in Bowling Green Bay (April 2009).</i>	5
<i>Plate 2. Juvenile spinner sharks, Carcharhinus brevipinna, caught by a commercial net boat off Rattlesnake Island (September 2010).</i>	13
<i>Plate 3. A tagged and calcein marked milk shark, Rhizoprionodon acutus, released into Cleveland Bay (July 2008).</i>	35
<i>Plate 4. Hammerhead sharks, Sphyrna mokarran (top and centre) and Sphyrna lewini (below), caught in Bowling Green Bay (September 2007).</i>	63
<i>Plate 5. Dissection of a blacktip shark to help determine species (September 2010).</i>	99
<i>Plate 6. Spot-tail shark, Carcharhinus sorrah (May 2009).</i>	113
<i>Plate 7. Adult male scalloped hammerhead, Sphyrna lewini, caught in Halifax Bay (April 2009).</i>	155
<i>Plate 8. Sunset at rattlesnake island (December 2008).</i>	179

Abstract

Elasmobranchs (sharks and rays) are captured by a number of coastal fisheries operating across tropical northern Australia. As they are typically not targeted by these fisheries, accurate data on their biology and composition in the catch is often lacking, impeding sustainable use and management. Effective fisheries management is particularly important for elasmobranch populations as they often have biological characteristics that make them susceptible to overfishing and slow to recover once overfishing has occurred.

The largest extractive fishery for sharks in Queensland waters is the East Coast Inshore Finfish Fishery (ECIFF). In 2011 the commercial gillnet sector of this fishery had a total allowable catch (TAC) of 600 t, although catches rates were as high as 1400 t.yr⁻¹ in 2004, prior to the introduction of a TAC. The large geographic area, relatively low value, and disparate nature of the ECIFF mean monitoring of the catch is difficult. Yet as the fishery occurs predominantly within the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area (GBRWHA), it is closely scrutinised by the general public and stakeholder groups (e.g. marine park management, tourism, conservation groups). Effective and defensible science-based management is therefore especially important for the ECIFF.

Between 2006 and 2009 an onboard vessel observer survey program was undertaken on the ECIFF with the goal of obtaining biological information that could be used to help manage, in particular, the shark component of the fishery. The observer survey was the most extensive ever undertaken on the fishery and covered the three major habitats in which the fishery operates; river (estuarine), intertidal (0 – 2 m depth) and inshore coastal (2 – 25 m depth). At least 38 species of elasmobranchs were found to occur within the fishery, however the catch was dominated by Carcharhiniformes; 95% of individuals were from 25 species of the families Carcharhinidae, Hemigaleidae and Sphyrnidae. The main carcharhiniform taxa could be qualitatively categorised into four groups based on similar catch characteristics and life history traits: small coastal species (<1000 mm) were captured primarily as adults, moderate sized coastal species (1000–2000 mm) were captured at all sizes, large coastal semi-pelagic species (>2000 mm) were captured primarily as neonates or juveniles, and hammerheads were captured at all sizes.

The life history characteristics of five species occurring in the fishery were investigated in detail using biological samples collected during the observer program, from fishery-independent

sampling, and from purchase or donation from commercial fishers. The milk shark, *Rhizoprionodon acutus* was the fourth largest component of the elasmobranch catch by number in the ECIFF, making up 7.8 % of all carcharhiniform sharks caught. Growth was rapid in this species; von Bertalanffy growth parameters for males were $L_{\infty} = 821$ mm, $k = 0.94$ and $L_0 = 424$ mm and for females were $L_{\infty} = 859$ mm, $k = 0.63$ and $L_0 = 423$ mm. Females and males attained a maximum age of 8.1 and 4.5 years, respectively. The size at which 50% of females and males were mature was 780 and 742 mm, respectively. The age at which 50% of females and males were mature was 1.8 and 1.1 years of age, respectively. Despite being widely distributed globally and heavily exploited throughout its range, these are the first comprehensive estimates of age, growth and maturity for this species.

The life histories of two globally endangered hammerhead sharks captured by the ECIFF were also examined in detail. The scalloped hammerhead, *Sphyrna lewini* and the great hammerhead, *S. mokarran*, were the fourth and third largest components of the elasmobranch catch by weight in the ECIFF. The catch of *S. lewini* was heavily biased towards males and significant differences in growth and maturity characteristics were found between those occurring within the GBRWHA and individuals sampled from temperate waters off northern New South Wales. The life history of females was difficult to establish as adults could not be sourced from any fishery. The best-fit estimates for a three-parameter von Bertalanffy growth curve fit to both sexes were $L_{\infty} = 3312$ mm, $L_0 = 584$ mm and $k = 0.076$. Males attained a maximum age of at least 21 years while the longevity of females could not be determined. For *S. mokarran*, the best-fit growth parameters for a two parameter von Bertalanffy growth curve fit to both sexes and assuming a fixed size at birth (L_0) of 700 mm, were $L_{\infty} = 4027$ mm, and $k = 0.079$. Females lived to at least 39.1 years and males to at least 31.7 years. Length and age at 50% maturity was not significantly different between sexes and occurred at 2279 mm and 8.3 years.

The spot-tail shark, *C. sorrah*, is the second most important component of the elasmobranch catch in the ECIFF both by number and weight. For *C. sorrah* the best-fit growth parameters for a two parameter von Bertalanffy growth function with a fixed length at birth (L_0) of 550 mm were $L_{\infty} = 1085$ mm, and $k = 0.5513$ for males and $L_{\infty} = 1265$ mm, and $k = 0.3389$ for females. Growth was not sexually dimorphic prior to reaching maturity and as such 50% maturity occurred at 933 mm and 2.3 years in both sexes. Fifty percent maternity occurred at 1029 mm and 3.4 years indicating females began reproducing 1–2 years after reaching maturity. Males attained a maximum age of at least 9 years and females at least 14 years. Females had an annual, synchronous reproductive

cycle with ovulation occurring in March and parturition in early December after a gestation period of approximately 9 months. Females gave birth to between 1 and 6 pups of approximately 550 mm in length, and there was an increasing relationship between maternal length and fecundity.

The largest component of the elasmobranch catch in the ECIFF was the Australian blacktip shark, *C. tilstoni*. However, analysis of the life history of this species was confounded by the presence of the morphologically similar common blacktip shark, *C. limbatus*. Genetic methods were used to distinguish between these species, however a mismatch was found between identification using genetics and identification by vertebral counts. This mismatch was thought to be due to hybridisation between the two species. As there was no clear way to distinguish between the two species, a multi-faceted approach to species identification was developed.

Following this, best fit growth parameters for *C. tilstoni* using a two parameter von Bertalanffy growth function with a fixed length at birth (L_0) of 619 mm were $L_\infty = 1748$ mm, and $k = 0.137$ for males and $L_\infty = 2138$ mm, and $k = 0.099$ for females. However, growth was more accurately described by a two-phase variant of the von Bertalanffy growth function that suggested a cessation in growth occurs around 4.1–4.5 years of age. Like *C. sorrah*, growth was not sexually dimorphic prior to maturity and 50% maturity occurred at 1208 mm and 5.5 years in both sexes. Fifty percent maternity occurred at 1374 mm and 7.5 years indicating that females began reproducing approximately 2 years after maturity. *Carcharhinus tilstoni* has an annual, synchronous reproductive cycle, with ovulation occurring in March and parturition in early December after a gestation period of approximately 9 months. Females gave birth to between 1 and 7 pups with a mean size at birth of 621 mm.

The carcharhiniform sharks captured by the Queensland ECIFF display a range of life history characteristics ranging from small (<1000 mm) and rapidly growing ($k = 0.94$) species such as *R. acutus* to large (>4000 mm) and slow growing ($k = 0.079$) species such as *S. mokarran*. An appreciation of these life history characteristics is essential in data deficient fisheries such as the ECIFF where the productivity of captured species differs greatly and some species may be more vulnerable to overexploitation than others. This highlights the importance of ongoing studies on life history of sharks. The new life history data from the research should be used to help improve the management of the ECIFF and can help provide a sounder biological basis for decision making.

