Tagging News

From the ORI Cooperative Fish Tagging Project

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INCORPORATING
Helping people to care for our ocean

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FOREWARD

Dr Chantel Elston

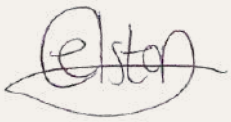
From linefish legends to tomorrow's tight lines

Last year marked a massive milestone - 40 years of the ORI-CFTP. Four decades of tag and release, and four decades of anglers like you helping to build one of the biggest citizen science tagging programmes in the world. Together, we've landed something truly special: a treasure chest of data that helps manage South Africa's linefish, and better fish handling and tagging practices that are making a real difference for the fish themselves.

But, just like any long fight on the line, the project has hit some headwinds. To keep this success story alive, we've had to face some hard truths and rethink how we work. The good news? We're not letting go. We're tightening the drag, making changes to keep things running smoothly, and doing everything possible to keep the project financially afloat.

I'm excited to have joined the ORI-CFTP team at such a crucial time. My promise to you is simple: I'll respect the legacy that's been built, while making sure we adapt and stay strong. This year's newsletter is a good example — same heart, fresh approach.

And as always, the project is nothing without you — the anglers who tag, release, and spread the word. You're the backbone of this community, and together we'll keep casting towards a future where our fish, our fishing, and our stories carry on for generations.



VISION

To foster the care and conservation of South Africa's marine fishes.

MISSION

To be a nationally and internationally recognised community of scientists and recreational anglers who promote ethical angling, inspire the care of South Africa's marine fishes, and collect vital tagging data to support science-based conservation and management.

THE FUTURE OF THE ORI-CFTP

Dr Chantel Elston | Dr Bruce Mann | Dr Ryan Daly

The ORI-CFTP has earned its stripes as one of the world's leading citizen science tagging programmes. But to keep this legacy alive – and to make sure we stick to the best standards – we need to run leaner and smarter. That's why we're rolling out two key changes to keep the project strong and sustainable.

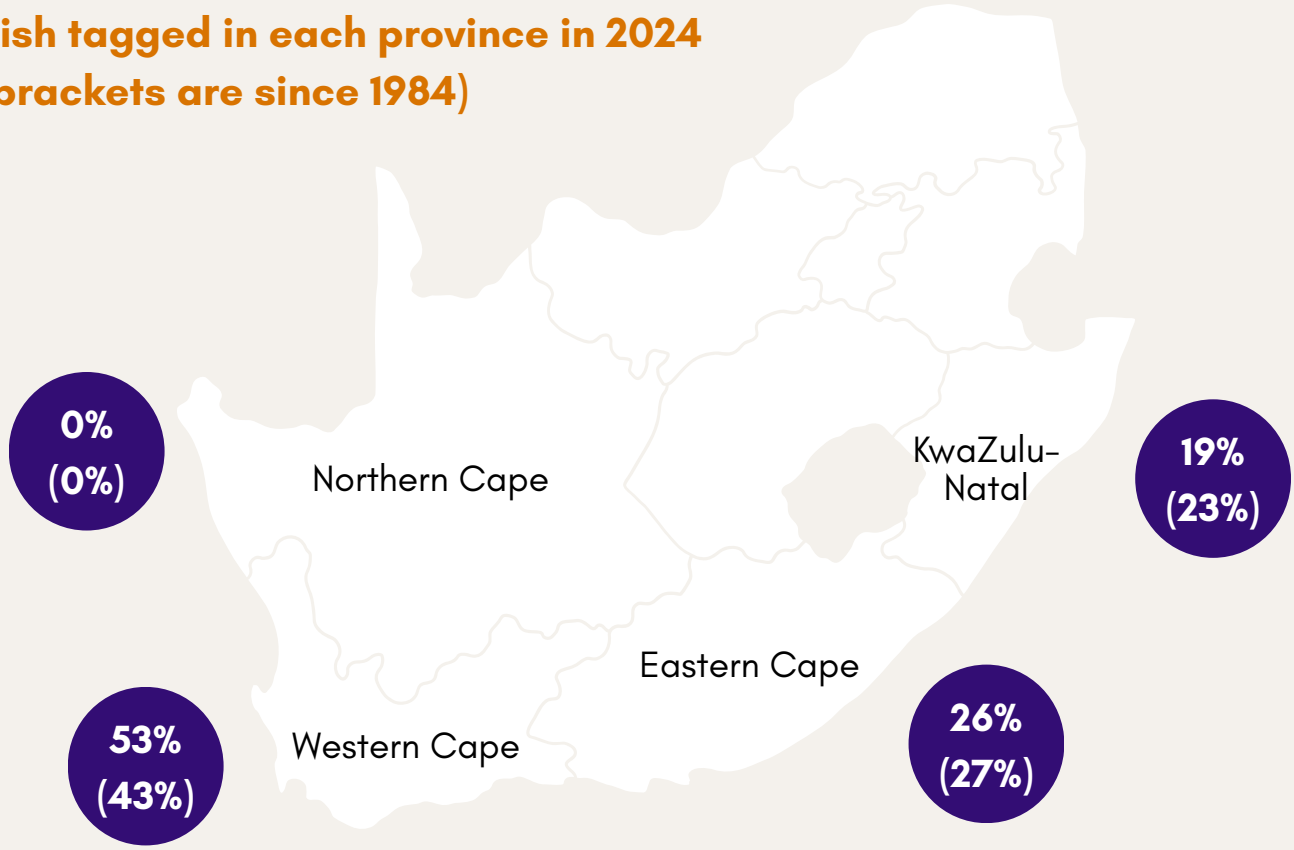
The first is that we have had to make a last resort decision to start charging members for their tags. While the project has historically provided tags free of charge, unfortunately we lost our primary funder last year. Despite our best efforts, applying to both government and corporate sponsors, we have been unable to secure the financial support needed to supply new tags, which are imported from a specialist supplier in Australia. However, we were encouraged by the results of our recent questionnaire survey, where most of you expressed support for this change. We decided on the pay-per-tag model, as this was the preferred option in the survey (see image below). The fee per tag will be paid in the same way as members have paid for the courier fee using the same bank details and POP system. Nevertheless, we will continue the search for funding opportunities and will subsidise the cost of the tags according to the amount of funds we are able to raise each year.

The second necessary change is to increase the minimum tagging size from 300 mm to 350 mm fork length (FL) and/or 400 mm total length (TL). The rationale for this step is based on observations by several fishery scientists of high mortality rates and high tag shedding by small fish, less than 350 mm FL (e.g. Mann et al. 2025). While this is species-specific, increasing the overall minimum tagging size for D-tags will reduce these risks, making sure we tag with care.

These changes will help us to keep the project running, continue to generate valuable data, and maintain the legacy that we have all built together. We trust that you will support these decisions, and we are grateful for your ongoing support and commitment. Together, we can keep ORI-CFTP thriving into the future.

Mann BQ, Dunlop S, Kyle R, Jordaan G, Daly R. 2025. Movement patterns of grey grunter Pomadasys furcatus (Pisces: Haemulidae) in the iSimangaliso Marine Protected Area, South Africa. African Journal of Zoology DOI: 10.1080/15627020.2025.2494581

Fish tagged in each province in 2024 (brackets are since 1984)

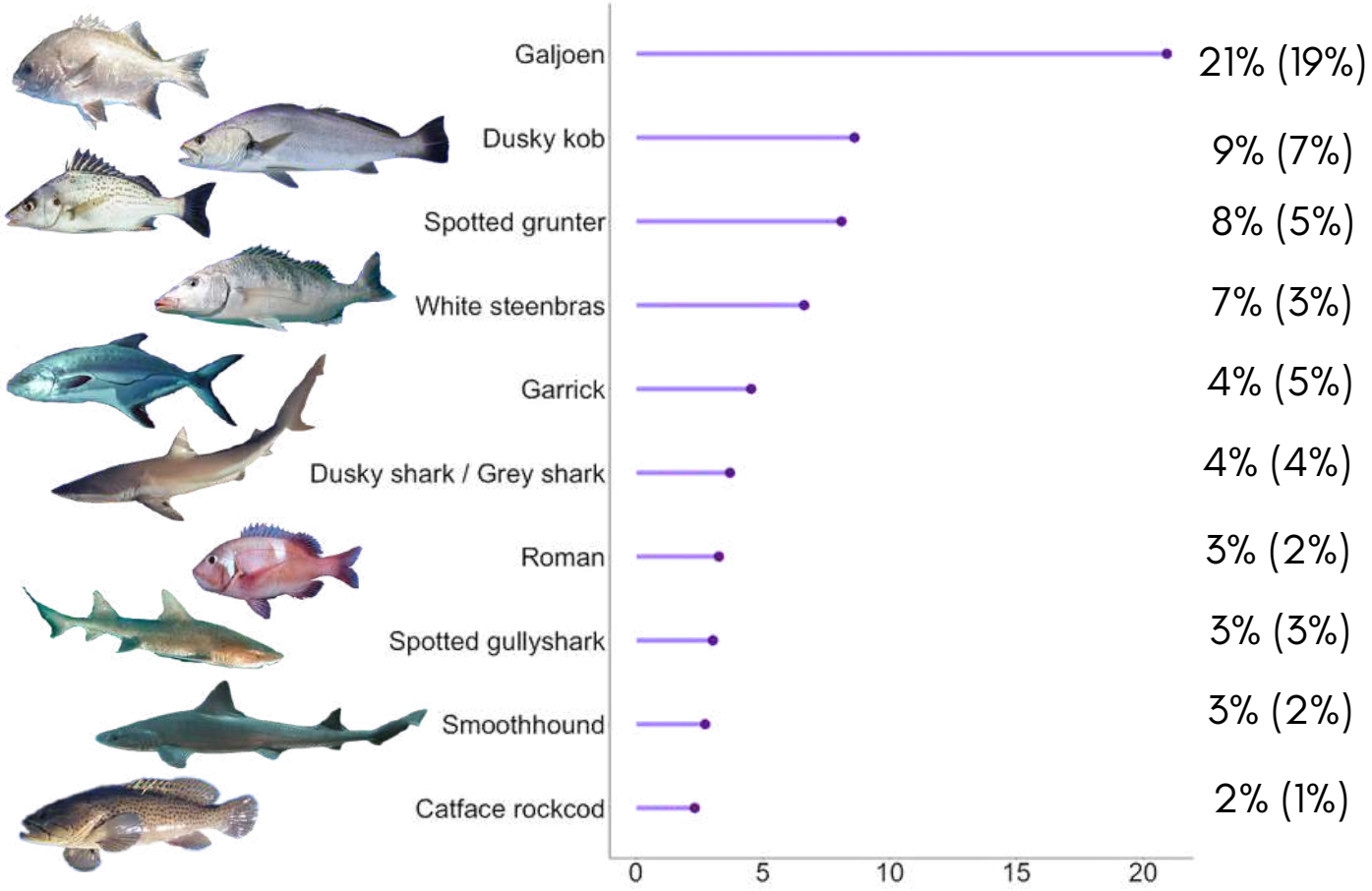


11,894
fish tagged in 2024
401,994 since 1984

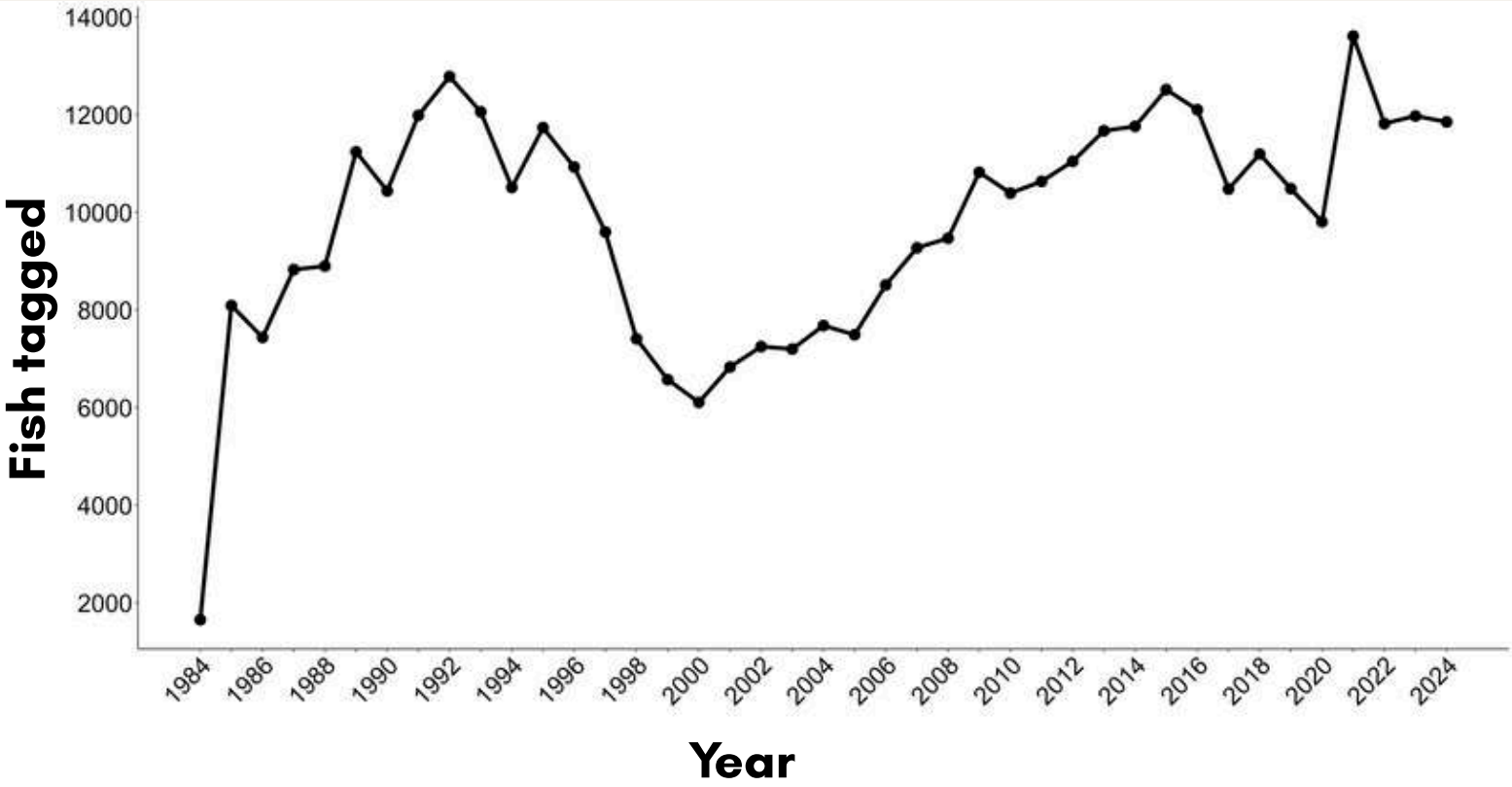
1,008
fish recaptured in 2024
26,899 since 1984

161
species tagged in 2024

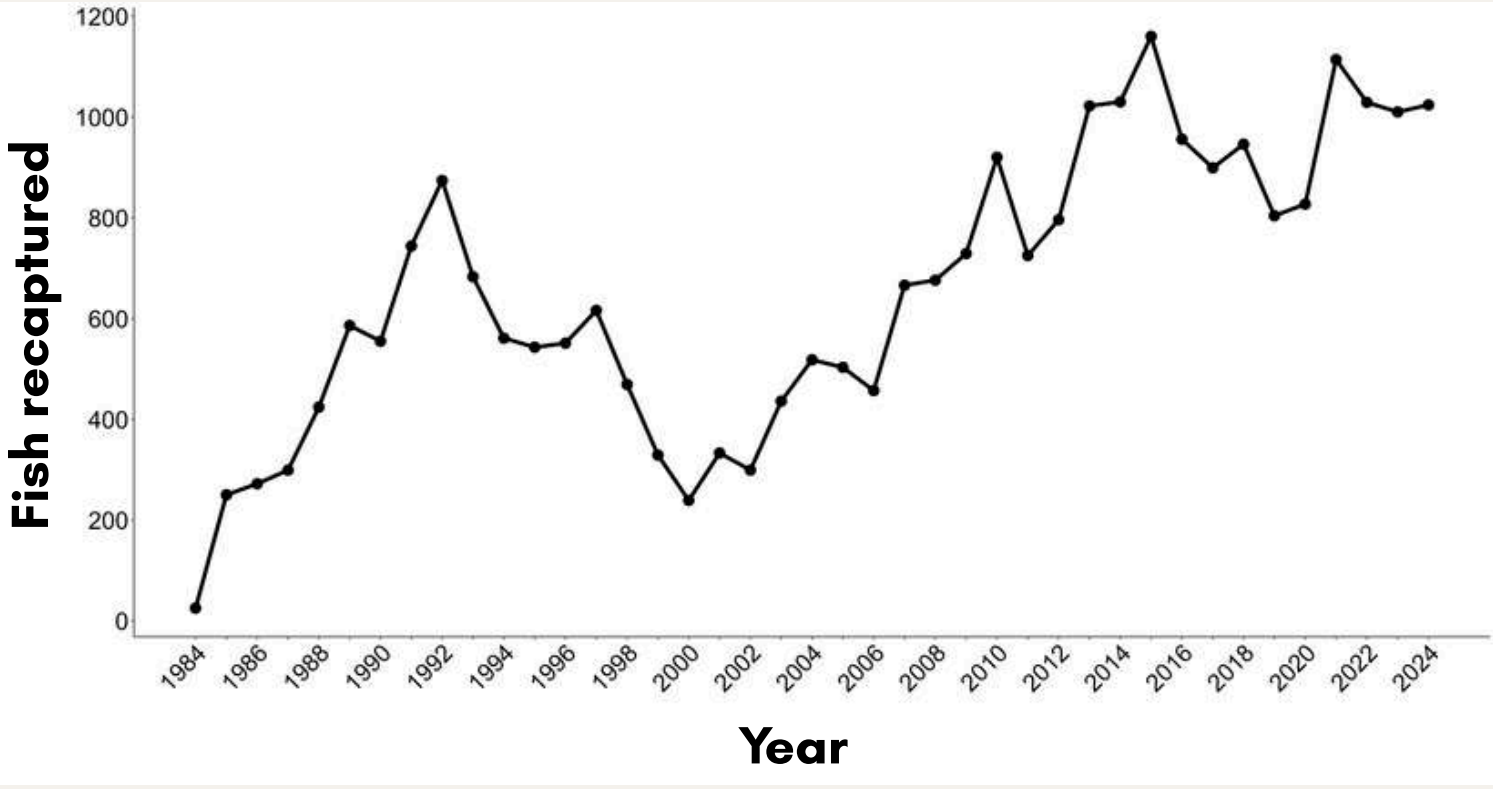
Top 10 species tagged in 2024 (brackets are since 1984)



Number of fish tagged per year



Number of fish recaptured per year









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Top taggers of 2024

Member Name	Tag releases 2024	Tag releases total	Tag recaptures 2024	Tag recaptures total
KEVIN HUMPHREYS	508	3715	14	155
NIKKI-LOUISE SMIT	394	963	9	29
JACQUES DE LA HARPE	260	2183	12	145
MATHEW WEEDMAN	258	1053	81	214
KOOS SMITH	217	1288	1	45
NIC DE KOCK	212	3435	5	253
NELIUS SPIES	186	523	10	35
MARK GALPIN	171	1889	7	194
BRADLEY SPARG	139	3043	3	169
CHARLES LILFORD	132	3914	2	169
DONAVAN COLE	120	1522	3	54
DIVAN COETZER	120	700	3	31
DWAYNE BOSHOFF	110	612	21	50
EDUARD STEYLS	106	500	2	12
RALDU POTGIETER	103	978	7	61
NIEL MALAN	100	963	4	49
REINER VON DER MARWITZ	100	334	1	19
DURAN PILLAY	99	206	6	11
ANDREW WOOD	93	232	6	16
JEFF ASHER-WOOD	91	1209	30	139
MATTHEW REDINGER	89	222	6	8
ERIC MOREY & DIRK SNYMAN	87	224	2	6
MIKHAIL DANIELS	86	340	20	72
VICTOR DA SILVA	85	155	5	13
JANNIE VAN BLERK	84	367	4	19
DONSIE VOLSCHENK	82	125	17	22
CHRISTOPHER PIKE	81	584	12	49
JAYSON ALERS	81	93	2	3
TIAAN SWART	80	205	5	7
GUY BALME	78	281	0	9
RUAN VAN DEN HEEVER	76	177	2	11
GRAHAM POLLARD	75	790	0	19
MATTHEW DE WET	71	174	2	6
RUSSELL HAND	67	998	22	134
DEAN IMPSON	65	159	2	3
WAYNE SPARG	64	72	0	0
BRUCE QUINTIN MANN	63	632	1	46
MATTHEW & SHANNEN KETHRO	58	183	5	15
NICHOLAS PAGEWOOD	56	76	1	1

Member Name	Tag releases 2024	Tag releases total	Tag recaptures 2024	Tag recaptures total
FRANCOIS VAN DER MERWE	51	95	2	5
BRADLEY GOUVERIS	50	99	4	5
BAVIAN BEZUIDENHOUT	49	104	0	2
MARCO WILDEMANN	48	388	0	12
NIKOS NICOLAIDIS	47	213	0	15
SHAUN VAN ZYL	46	497	0	25
WARREN KNEZOVICH	46	203	0	4
VAUGHN REILLY	45	333	2	38
STEVEN HUMPHREYS	44	391	1	6
JAYSON GILHAM	44	49	11	11
STRINIVASEN NAICKER	43	555	3	60
KEGAN MATTHEYS	42	136	0	7
HERMI SPANGENBERG	40	107	1	1
AMITH LACHMAN	39	90	6	8
ANNA PUTTER	38	107	1	5
TREVOR DUNBAR	38	57	0	0
CORNE ERASMUS	37	299	2	16
STEVE SUTHERLAND	37	119	0	3
NAKS LUTCHMAN	37	59	1	2
WALLIE STROEBEL	37	95	0	3
CHARLES DE LA HARPE	35	637	0	67
LUAN ELS	35	92	2	7
CLIFFORD HART	34	2774	0	177
CRAIG NELSON	34	870	1	50
JANDRE HORN	34	69	1	2
EUGENE VAN TONDER	34	43	3	3
MAARTEN MOLENAAR	33	827	1	51
RUAN VAN DER WALT	33	486	1	28
GARY DU RANDT	33	91	0	0
STEFAN OOSTHUIZEN	32	706	0	64
JP GELDENHUYS	32	665	0	52
DP VAN HUYSSTEEN	32	228	1	17
STEPHAN OLIVIER	32	196	0	13
MICHAEL PARRIS	32	173	2	13
ROBERT MILLAR	32	52	2	3
JJ STRYDOM	31	310	0	16
BERRIE FERREIRA	30	1030	0	38
ROBERT TUZZA	29	90	2	2
ANTHONY NEL	29	86	0	7










Top fish tagged since 1984 (excluding prohibited species)

Species	tagged	recaptured		km travelled		days free	
	#	#	%	avg	max	avg	max
Galjoen	77468	5682	7	42	1892	460	7706
Dusky kob	28019	2034	7	32	1625	382	5997
Garrick/leervis	21291	1580	7	204	2060	330	3208
Spotted grunter	19174	485	3	12	823	297	2950
Dusky shark / Grey shark	17557	1747	10	69	1792	145	5457
Bronze whaler shark	11681	464	4	175	1790	471	4222
Spotted gullyshark	11484	1009	9	36	1056	632	6761
White steenbras	11236	581	5	30	804	272	2538
Shad / Elf	10728	420	4	274	1676	181	1656
Common smoothhound	8999	325	4	52	1404	675	7481
Raggedtooth shark	7771	1316	17	183	2966	838	9591
Roman	6391	418	7	4	294	460	8134
Bronze bream	6378	193	3	17	799	214	2355
Giant sandshark	6152	610	10	37	1210	449	4485
Slinger	5265	212	4	39	1110	259	2814
Black musselcracker/poenskop	5226	366	7	35	791	673	6809
Yellowbelly rockcod	4837	785	16	7	425	515	3876
Giant kingfish	4575	177	4	16	419	383	2226
Largespotted pompano	4554	82	2	12	270	266	1374
Catface rockcod	4456	1102	25	6	525	215	2867
Broadnose sevengill shark	4060	281	7	65	597	571	5297
Zebra	3944	87	2	2	52	257	1729
White musselcracker/brusher	3617	110	3	58	843	602	3499
Sailfish	3616	30	1	59	1060	145	727
Baardman	3220	57	2	1	17	264	811
Santer	2891	185	6	18	490	288	1925
Speckled snapper	2859	975	34	3	200	424	3466
Striped catshark	2653	258	10	8	381	520	4143
Red steenbras	2480	252	10	123	923	938	9257
Silver kob	1951	77	4	54	354	349	1535
Smooth hammerhead	1940	39	2	207	1153	445	3075
Natal stumpnose	1903	52	3	14	230	234	1451
Ladyfish/springer	1855	38	2	20	412	411	1426
Perch/riverbream	1743	253	15	2	325	368	1583
Cavebass	1738	257	15	13	765	448	3116
Scotsman	1711	437	26	25	1211	638	3189
Dageraad	1707	143	8	27	592	459	3880
Brassy kingfish	1635	79	5	2	45	277	1441
River snapper	1626	300	18	3	391	325	2403
Albacore/longfin tuna	1569	36	2	304	1008	412	2585

Top fish tagged since 1984 (excluding prohibited species)

Species	tagged	recaptured		km travelled		days free	
	#	#	%	avg	max	avg	max
King mackerel/cuda	1458	62	4	360	1552	542	2604
Dark shyshark	1422	324	23	4	102	216	2137
Leopard catshark	1330	263	20	7	722	453	4431
Westcoast steenbras	1316	81	6	59	280	259	1449
Duckbillray	1283	16	1	39	402	698	1427
Blacktip shark	1274	58	5	92	1288	254	1846
Scalloped hammerhead	1252	23	2	153	1029	474	3051
Soupfin shark	1251	38	3	161	1034	709	3604
Cape yellowtail	1187	52	4	171	1746	325	1380
Stonebream	1130	10	1	67	524	312	945
Milkshark	1091	34	3	105	977	271	3575
Blacktip kingfish	1057	29	3	4	54	147	545
Bigeye kingfish	1050	40	4	12	163	243	2751
Geelbek	1039	12	1	102	904	332	2569
Yellowfin tuna	1020	13	1	664	5645	242	697
Squaretail kob	965	70	7	29	1444	178	2043
Seventy-four	902	32	4	55	521	531	2845
Spinner shark	885	27	3	94	1055	257	1411
Black marlin	862	4	0	1381	3633	134	240
Potato bass	709	32	5	2	22	358	2639
Brown shyshark	682	62	9	1	12	307	997
Tiger shark	647	30	5	260	4067	373	1823
Janbruin	635	20	3	1	15	145	502
Hardnosed smoothhound	614	12	2	94	340	283	870
Halfmoon rockcod	573	94	16	1	49	660	3189
Striped marlin	571	2	0	805	848	202	379
Bull shark	545	35	6	74	539	406	2771
Puffadder shyshark	509	50	10	1	20	270	1366
Red stumpnose	487	12	2	10	107	844	1998
Cape bream	485	17	4	2	10	247	1078
Southern pompano	475	27	6	60	464	150	848
Queen mackerel	471	3	1	4	12	376	1044
Lemonfish	435	16	4	5	64	240	749
Pickhandle barracuda	426	60	14	2	44	280	1856
Talang queenfish	426	16	4	1	10	193	630
Bluefin kingfish	408	14	3	12	94	220	411
Banded galjoen	363	8	2	71	562	229	507
Flapnose houndshark	356	50	14	1	43	917	3189
Sandbar shark	346	6	2	166	345	250	536
Blackspot shark	321	13	4	77	360	255	945

NOT ALL FISH SHOULD BE TAGGED HERE'S WHY

Rethinking which fish we tag: lessons from rays

Dr Chantel Elston

Throughout the four decades of the ORI-CFTP, one of our goals has always been to collect the most valuable data with the least amount of stress to fish. At the end of the day, these are animals that we're trying to conserve. And thanks to the amazing efforts of our tagging members, we've learned so much about the movements, growth, and survival of many important coastal species in South Africa. But here's something else we've learned along the way: not all fish are worth tagging - at least not with external dart tags.

Blue stingray
Helen Walne

Duckbill ray
Chantel Elston

Why Some Fish Just Aren't Worth Tagging

As strange as it may sound, tagging the wrong species can waste resources and provide little to no scientific value. That's because some species:

- **Don't retain tags well** - the tags fall out and so are rarely recaptured.
- **Are not caught very often** - we don't get enough tags out or recaptures for useful insights.
- **Are already well-studied** - and tagging more won't tell us anything new.

A perfect example? Rays. Despite being fascinating animals that are frequently caught along the coast, rays have extremely low external tag recapture rates - around 1% for most species. That means if 100 are tagged, we only ever hear back from 1. Not great odds. So, instead of tagging rays using dart tags, scientists have turned to other techniques that give us far more bang for our buck.

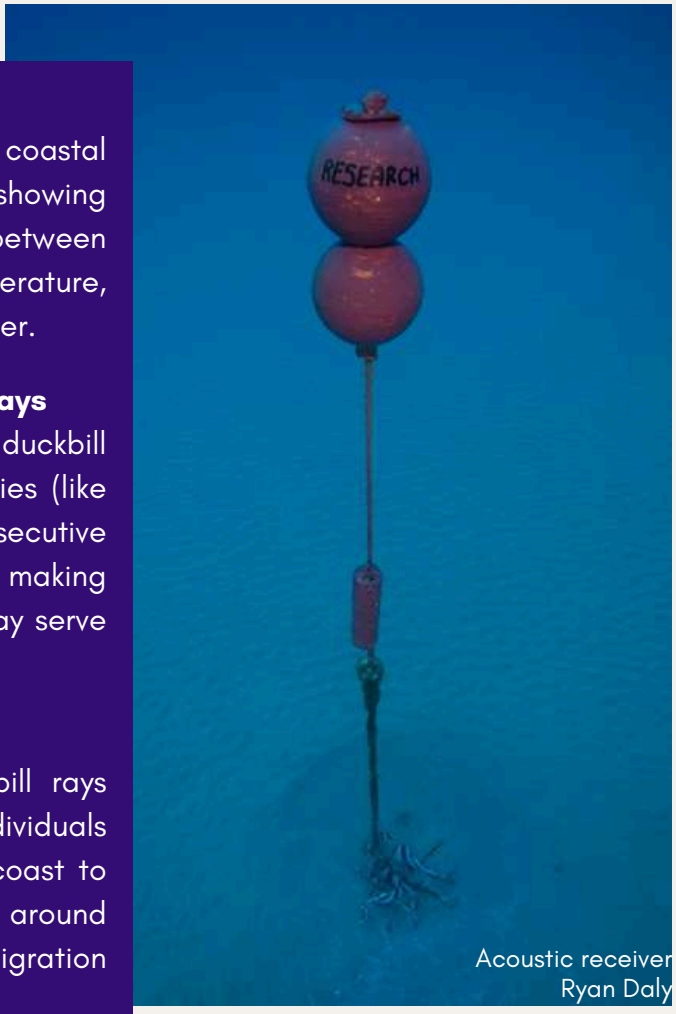
Acoustic telemetry: listening instead of waiting

Rather than relying on an external dart tag recapture, acoustic telemetry allows us to "listen" for tagged fish using a network of underwater receivers. Rays are implanted with a small transmitter that pings an ID code to any receiver they swim past. This approach has completely changed what we know about these under-appreciated and understudied species - and South Africa has become a world leader in using acoustic telemetry to study rays, largely because of the incredible collaborative network of receivers along our coastline known as the Acoustic Tracking Array Platform (ATAP). Here are some key discoveries made along the way:

Blue stingrays stay local, but move seasonally
Blue stingrays *Dasyatis chrysonota* tend to stick to coastal bays and shallow areas where they were tagged, showing strong home-body instincts. But, they also moved between habitats depending on the season and water temperature, potentially making deeper off-shore movements in winter.

Estuaries are important for diamond and duckbill rays
A few tagged diamond rays *Gymnura natalensis* and duckbill rays *Aetomylaeus bovinus* returned to specific estuaries (like the Breede) year after year — some for up to six consecutive years! They moved into these estuaries during summer, making winter migrations in between, suggesting estuaries may serve as important resting or feeding grounds in the summer.

Rays migrate - far!
Speaking of winter migrations, diamond and duckbill rays shocked us with how far they travelled. Some individuals travelled over 1000 km from De Hoop on the south coast to Durban on the east coast in winter, while those tagged around Durban tended to stay put, suggesting varied migration behaviours even within a species.



Acoustic receiver
Ryan Daly

What this means for you

External dart tagging still plays a critical role for learning about many species - especially important fish and sharks. But for rays, we've learned that acoustic telemetry is the better option, and this is why we discontinued the tagging of all ray species a few years ago.
In the same light, we are also busy updating our Priority Species Tagging List - the master list of fishes we ask for your help in tagging - to make sure your hard work, and the tags you put out, are being used in the best way possible! Keep your eyes peeled for that new list coming out soon!

SPOTTIES IN THE SPOTLIGHT

What tagging has taught us about spotted gully sharks

Dr Bruce Mann

If you've ever fished in the Eastern and Western Cape, chances are you've encountered a spotted gully shark *Triakis megalopterus* (fondly known as 'spotties') - a popular species among shore-based anglers, especially on the competitive circuit.

Found from southern Angola all the way to the central Transkei, with a clear genetic separation between the Namibian/Angolan and South African populations, these sharks tend to stick to inshore waters, where they feed on a variety of invertebrates and fish, especially red rock crabs and small lobsters. They can grow up to about 2 metres in length and weigh as much as 36 kg, with some individuals living up to 30 years!

Thanks to the dedication of ORI-CFTP volunteer anglers like you, more than 7 200 gully sharks had been tagged by the end of 2021 — making them the third most commonly tagged shark in the programme (after dusky and copper sharks). Of those, 657 (9.1%) have been recaptured, giving scientists a goldmine of data to better understand how these sharks move and grow.

Dr Bruce Mann tagging spotted gully sharks

What the science showed (Mann et al. 2024):

- Most tagged spotties didn't go far — the average distance between tag and recapture was just 31 km, with some moving as little as a few kilometres from their original spot.
- The furthest traveller clocked a whopping 911 km, and one shark was at liberty for 17 years before being recaptured!
- About 67% of recaptures showed clear resident behaviour, meaning they stayed in the same general area — especially juveniles.
- While adults tended to move more, there was no clear evidence of seasonal migrations linked to mating or pupping.
- Growth was slow, averaging just 50 mm per year, and some individuals may theoretically live up to 41 years based on these results.

The resident nature and slow growth of gully sharks make them particularly vulnerable to overfishing. Thankfully, existing regulations (like the bag limit of one per angler per day and the ban on sales) are helping keep spotted gully shark populations healthy. But the study also highlighted the need for more protection in no-take MPAs, where suitable habitat exists, to ensure these incredible sharks are around for generations to come. The researchers also recommended more work using acoustic telemetry to track fine-scale movements and differences between males and females.

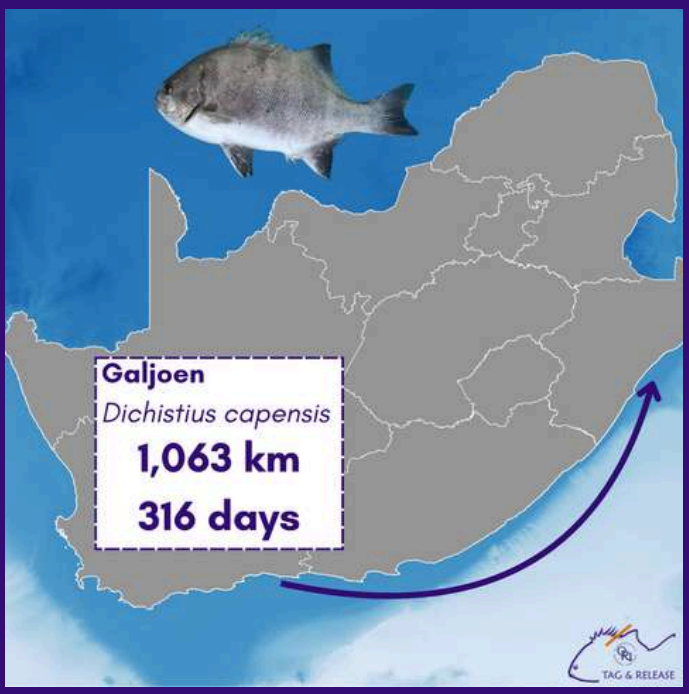
Mann BQ, Jordaan GL, Dalton WN, Daly R, Soekoe M, Potts WM, Smale MJ, Swart L. 2024. Movement and growth of spotted gully shark Triakis megalopterus in South African waters. African Journal of Marine Science 46(2): 1-15. DOI: 10.2989/1814232X.2024.2355868

Interesting recaptures from 2024

Our national fish — the galjoen — holds the crown as the most tagged species in the ORI-CFTP. But despite all those tags, this hardy surf-zone favourite still keeps a few secrets.

Most galjoen (about 90%) are resident, sticking to the same stretch of coast. But about 10% are nomads, choosing to cruise up and down the coast. One recapture from August 2024 highlighted this unique behaviour. Angler Zainul Khan recaptured a galjoen in Durban that had travelled about 1,000 km from its tagging spot in Sedgefield on the Garden Route! That puts it among the rare 11% of galjoen ever recaptured more than 100 km from where they were tagged.

Are there truly "resident" galjoen and "nomadic" galjoen? Or can individuals switch lifestyles as they grow? We don't know yet — but with more recaptures, we're getting closer to solving this mystery.



The month of April brought us a speckled snapper with wanderlust of its own.

Speckled snapper are often real homebodies, with about 75% of recaptures happening right where they were tagged but, this individual swam 63 km in 478 days. That might not sound very far, but this fish made it into the top 10 longest journeys ever recorded for the species (out of 699 recaptures - the current champion still holds the crown with 200 km). It's thought that approximately 5% of individuals will make these larger movements.

The fish was tagged by Rob Kyle and recaptured by James Sullivan.

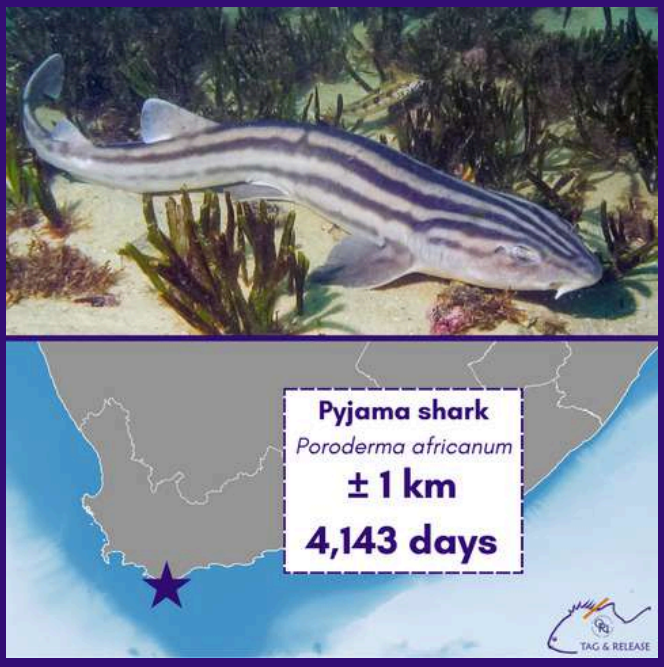
Interesting recaptures from 2024

Now we move onto those fish who surprise us years later and right at the start of 2024, we had our record-breaking diamond ray. With this individual bucking the trend of rays losing their tags, this one held onto it's tag for a really long time. It was originally tagged in Swartkops in October 2009 and after more than 14 years at liberty (5,220 days to be exact!) it was recaptured in Coega Harbour, only 10 km away.

Another surprise, it was recaptured in the same harbour the year before, in February 2023. This ray clearly knows a good neighbourhood when it finds one! Although from what acoustic telemetry has shown us about this species, it likely spends winter months cruising up the coastline to find warmer waters, returning to Coega in summer months (see article above).

In all that time, this individual only grew about 60 cm in width, which is about 4 cm a year, highlighting how slow-growing and long-lived these rays can be, making them particularly susceptible to fishing pressure and population declines.

This ray was initially tagged by David Clarke, and recaptured by Vivienne Dames.



Finally, we had a standout pyjama shark (or striped catshark) that was tagged in 2012 on the Cape South Coast and recaptured in April 2024 after more than 11 years (4,143 days) at liberty!

What makes this recapture really special is that we don't actually know how long pyjama sharks can live for, and this is an important clue to unravel that mystery.

And in that time? It barely budged - being recaptured just 1 km away. Talk about loyalty to your local reef.

Bonus shark facts: These pyjama sharks are nocturnal and often rest in groups within kelp beds or under rocky ledges. At night, they perform clever "barrel rolls" to pry octopus or crabs out of rocky crevices. They are an important endemic predatory species, keeping our South African kelp beds and cold-water rocky reefs healthy, so it's heartening to know their populations are holding stable.

This shark was initially tagged by Stefan Oosthuizen and recaptured by Alaine Peo.

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