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NOAA DETERMINES SMALLTOOTH SAWFISH ENDANGERED

NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) today announced it has determined the U.S. population of smalltooth sawfish warrants protection under the Endangered Species Act. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) is an agency of the Commerce Department.

"This is an animal that inhabits shallow coastal waters of tropical seas and estuaries very close to muddy and sandy bottoms, and isn't seen much," said Dr. Bill Hogarth, assistant administrator for NOAA Fisheries. "With this listing, we hope that people will become more aware of this vulnerable sawfish, and will help in our efforts to save it for future generations."

During an extensive status review, scientists determined that the U.S. population of smalltooth sawfish, currently found off South Florida, is in danger of extinction. Biologists estimate that there has been a decline of more than 95 percent of the population. This will be the first marine fish and first elasmobranch listed under the ESA. Elasmobranchs are fish with skeletons made of cartilage.

NOAA Fisheries added sawfish to the candidate species list in 1991, removed it in 1997, and placed it back on the list in June, 1999. In November 1999, the Center for Marine Conservation filed a petition with NOAA Fisheries requesting that this species be listed as endangered.

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Smalltooth sawfish are large, shark-like fish that are one of several living species in the sawfish family. Sawfish, in general, are found around the world along coasts, in bays and in rivers of mostly tropical climates. They get their name from the long, flattened "saw" – rimmed by dozens of "teeth" – that protrudes forward from its head. A sawfish uses its saw to stir up muddy or sandy bottoms to find and injure prey. Smalltooth sawfish can grow to more than 18 ft. long and live more than 20 years.

Sawfish are extremely vulnerable to overexploitation because they become easily entangled in nets, have a restricted habitat and are slow to mature. Biologists believe that accidental captures in various fishing gear, especially gillnets, and habitat degradation were the main causes of the smalltooth sawfish's decline.

Prior to 1960, smalltooth sawfish from the U.S. population were commonly found throughout the shallow waters of the Gulf of Mexico and the eastern seaboard up to North Carolina. Currently they are found off peninsular Florida with the largest numbers occurring in the Everglades and Florida Keys regions.

NOAA Fisheries is dedicated to protecting and preserving our nation's living marine resources through scientific research, management, enforcement, and the conservation of marine mammals and other protected marine species and their habitat. To learn more about NOAA Fisheries, please visit <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov>.

The Commerce Department's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and providing environmental stewardship of our nation's coastal and marine resources. To learn more about NOAA, please visit: <http://www.noaa.gov>.

A complete description of NOAA Fisheries' finding on the smalltooth sawfish was published in today's Federal Register. More information on today's action, including photos and fact sheets, are available on the NOAA Fisheries web page at: <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov>.

Video and Photos are available for the media.