Shark abundance on the deep island slopes of the Dutch Caribbean ABC-islands: A potential conservation and research opportunity

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Large marine apex predators have become exceedingly rare in shallow neritic waters around most Caribbean islands, including the ABC-islands (Aruba, Bonaire, Curacao) of the Leeward Dutch Caribbean. This is especially the case for several species of sharks. In May 2000, 24 2-hr long deepwater submersible dives were conducted off the islands of Aruba, Bonaire and Curacao, at depths ranging between 80-900 m. Eight shark sightings were recorded, amounting to 6 different species, among which the endangered *Hexanchus griseus*. These observations suggest a surprising diversity and density of deepwater sharks around the steep island slopes of leeward Dutch islands. This is further supported by anecdotal accounts by deepwater snapper fishermen regarding frequent nuisance shark hinder, and clearly contrast to the very low abundance of sharks in the shallow near shore environment. Several additional deepwater sharks can be recorded for the island based on opportunistic catch and collection records, including *Hexanchus nakamurai*. We ascribe this apparent abundance of deepwater sharks around these islands to the combination of steep island slopes and generally strong currents that greatly hinder effective deepwater snapper fishing and keep deepwater fishing effort around these islands very low. We conclude by emphasizing the major contrast between deep and shallow water shark abundance and diversity in the Leeward Dutch Caribbean and highlight the deepwater shark populations of these islands as a seemingly fortuitous conservation and research opportunity.

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