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Rosie O'Donnell vs. the hammerhead

TV personality criticized for participating in shark killing

By [David Fleshler](#), Sun Sentinel

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Rosie O'Donnell and her family caught huge hammerhead sharks in fishing trips off the South Florida coast.

Now the TV personality is catching abuse from environmentalists, irate at the killing of ocean predators that are considered overfished around the globe. Florida banned killing them Jan. 1, long after O'Donnell's fishing trips.

Mark "The Shark" Quartiano, the famous Miami Beach shark fishermen who guided the expeditions, recently posted a photo of O'Donnell next to a dead hammerhead on his web site as "This Month's Celebrity Angler." Since then, as other photos of O'Donnell shark-killing expeditions surfaced, environmentalists have attacked her via Facebook and Twitter accounts, accusing her of going after species that are struggling to survive.

"Right now sharks are the most endangered animals around," said Erik Brush, a Sarasota marine conservationist who helped start the campaign against O'Donnell. "This is basically an endorsement. It sends the message that it's an OK activity. And this is not an activity that we want celebrities endorsing."

O'Donnell's publicist did not respond to requests for comment.

Quartiano defended the trips, which took place over the past two or three years, calling O'Donnell "a great angler. She's very conservation-minded. We've caught a lot of fish and released a lot of fish. We've also caught fish for eating and trophies."

As for O'Donnell's reaction to the controversy, he said "She's amused by it. She wants me to go on her show."

He defended killing hammerheads, saying the few caught for sport were dwarfed by the huge numbers taken by commercial fishing fleets. "These conservation guys are hitting the wrong target," he said.

No one accuses O'Donnell of doing anything illegal. But they say a celebrity known for her philanthropic work, particularly for children, should have been aware of the conservation implications of her actions.

Samantha Whitcraft, conservation biologist with the non-profit group Shark Savers, said she contacted O'Donnell through Twitter, offering a calm, non-confrontational discussion.

"She emailed, What do you propose?" Whitcraft said. "I said I'd take to her to a shark research lab, to which I thought her response would be Hell, yeah, but I never heard anything back. To be fair, I think by the time I had reached her she had been unbelievably harassed. I saw her Twitter page and a lot of overly aggressive hazing."

Among those criticizing O'Donnell are marine biologists, diving organizations and members of environmental groups such as Shark Savers, Planet Ocean Alliance and the Australian Anti-Shark-Finning Alliance.

"Rosie O'Donnell just went HAMMERHEAD fishing with her family?!" tweeted a woman in Seattle. "Apparently not aware of our sharks reaching extinction. LET HER KNOW!!"

The state of Florida imposed a ban on the killing of great hammerheads, scalloped hammerheads and smooth hammerheads, which took effect Jan. 1. The scalloped hammerhead is being considered for the federal endangered species list. Hammerheads are in trouble worldwide due to the demand in East Asia for shark fin soup, for which hammerhead fins are considered ideal.

O'Donnell, who has a home on Miami Beach's celebrity-packed Star Island, has taken her children on several shark-fishing trips with Quartiano, who her blog refers to as "Rosie's favorite shark hunter."

"Rosie and her kids have gone fishing with Mark the Shark and have caught 3 or 4 HUGE sharks not far off the shore," she wrote in one blog entry.

"She's a sweetheart," Quartiano said. "She loves children."

A Facebook site targeting both is called "StopRosie O'Donnell& Mark the Shark Hunter killing our oceans."

The sharks in two of the photos include a great hammerhead, the largest of the family, and either a great or scalloped hammerhead, said Neil Hammerschlag, director of the R.J. Dunlap Marine Conservation Program and research assistant professor at the University of Miami's Rosenstiel School of Marine and Atmospheric Science. He said the incident showed a failure to appreciate the importance of marine wildlife.

"She wouldn't go out hunting tigers. I don't see her pictured in front of some tiger strung up," he said. "Yet these are the tigers of the ocean, they're a top predator and they're in serious decline. Yet we kill them for sport."

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