Final Evaluation Report

We ask all grant recipients to complete a project evaluation that helps us to gauge the success of your project. This must be sent in **MS Word and not PDF format**. We understand that projects often do not follow the predicted course but knowledge of your experiences is valuable to us and others who may be undertaking similar work – remember that negative experiences are just as valuable as positive ones if they help others to learn from them.

Please DO NOT fill in and submit this form until the project has been completed.

Complete the form in English. Note that the information may be edited before posting on our website.

Please email this report to jane@rufford.org.

Your Details	
Full Name	Andrej A. Gajić
Project Title	Effective conservation and research of threatened sharks, skates and rays through rescue, rehabilitation, tagging and re-introduction
Application ID	38232-C
Date of this Report	15. 09. 2025.

1. Indicate the level of achievement of the project's original objectives and include any relevant comments on factors affecting this.

Objective	Not achieved	Partially achieved	Fully achieved	Comments
Establish a regional Center for research and rehabilitation				We successfully established the first dedicated center for advanced research, rescue, and rehabilitation of elasmobranchs in the Adriatic region. The facility is now fully functional and equipped for advanced research, rescue operations, veterinary treatment, and education. It has hosted dozens of international events, and received official recognition and support from the Albanian government and UNEP MAP Barcelona Convention.
Design and Implement rescue, rehabilitation and release Protocols				These protocols were designed both for effective rehabilitation and rescue and understanding the recovery and post-capture survival potential which is vital for effective conservation. The protocols were successfully implemented on numerous occasions, including some of the rarest and deep-sea species (rough sharks, spiny butterfly rays, etc). They are now a standard practice at our center and represent a pioneering step for understanding the recovery and post-capture survival in the Adriatic.
Initiate the acoustic telemetry program in				We organized and hosted the very first interactive workshop in

the Adriatic region				the region with InnovaSea, the global leader in acoustic tagging technology, with participants from more than 12 countries. The initiative has also attracted strong interest from the European Union, which requested similar programs in both Vlorë Bay and Neum Bay. With the groundwork completed, we anticipate collecting and analysing the first telemetry results in 2026, marking a major milestone in elasmobranch post-capture research.
Advanced research on pathology, traumatology, and toxicology				We carried out extensive advanced research on pathology, traumatology, toxicology, and reproductive biology, examining more than 37,000 elasmobranchs (Gajić et al., 2025) in our research center. Studies focused particularly on reproductive biology, trauma and injuries caused by fisheries, and a wide range of other biological traits. These analyses have generated critical insights into species health, post-capture survival, and conservation needs, and have positioned our center as a regional leader in advanced elasmobranch diagnostics and research.
Generate and disseminate vital scientific knowledge				A total of 11 scientific papers were published in leading, high-impact peer-review journals, delivering the very first data on populations, key habitats, and biological traits of several elasmobranch species. Many of these were previously documented only through sparse

				or anecdotal reports, and our findings provided the first robust scientific evidence necessary for effective conservation. These publications not only advanced global knowledge but also directly informed conservation policy and management at national and regional levels.
Support national and regional conservation policy				We were officially invited by the Albanian Ministry of Environment and Tourism to contribute to develop the Annex II of the SPA/BD Protocol under the UNEP MAP Barcelona Convention, which led to two additional shark species being proposed for inclusion on the list of endangered or threatened species. At the national level, we have been actively working with the Albanian government on updating the Red List and strengthening fisheries and conservation policies. Moreover, we are working together with the ministries of Albania, Italy, Bosnia and Herzegovina on regional conservation efforts.
Build capacity and train future experts in the Adriatic region				Through the UNEP MAP SPA/RAC and MASE funded initiative, we organized the first regional training on advanced research and monitoring of chondrichthyans in the Adriatic Sea. Due to the great success of this event, a second training was funded specifically for local students in Albania. In addition, over the past three years we have conducted more than 50 training sessions for local and

				international students and young experts, with participants joining from across Europe, the United States, and Africa.
Enhance public awareness through high quality media				The project and its results gained outstanding international visibility, being featured in more than 100 media outlets from over 50 countries across all continents. Coverage included some of the world's leading platforms such as National Geographic, BBC, CNN, Forbes, The Independent, The Telegraph, Miami Herald, Yahoo, MSN, AOL, and many more. Additionally, CNN filmed a dedicated short documentary on our research and the newly established rehabilitation center, which will be aired soon.
Ensure fishers and local community engagement				We actively engaged local fishing communities through direct training in species identification, safe handling, and rapid-release protocols, ensuring higher survival rates of incidentally caught sharks and rays. Dozens of outreach events were organized in the rehabilitation center, at the main port, landing sites, and even in local cafés and bars, creating genuine dialogue and trust. Several fishers became so committed that they were entrusted with keys to the center and regularly brought in elasmobranchs for rescue and research.
Lay the foundation for long-term conservation				By establishing the first dedicated Elasmobranch Rescue and Rehabilitation Center in the

				Adriatic, developing advanced research programs, and securing strong partnerships with government institutions, international organizations, and local communities, we created a strong platform for long-term conservation. Our work directly contributed to policy processes such as amendments to the UNEP MAP Barcelona Convention and local-scale improvements across the Adriatic region, ensuring stronger legal protection for threatened species.

2. Describe the three most important outcomes of your project.

Establishment of the first dedicated center for advanced research, rescue, and rehabilitation of elasmobranchs in the Adriatic region

The center now stands as the first dedicated facility for advanced elasmobranch research and rehabilitation in the Adriatic, producing vital scientific knowledge published in leading peer-reviewed journals and drawing global attention through coverage in more than 100 international media outlets. Alongside its pioneering research role, it delivers direct conservation action, professional treatment of rescued animals, in-vitro incubation and reproduction, and high-level training opportunities for future experts. This achievement secures the foundation for long-term protection of threatened species and establishes Albania as a regional leader in elasmobranch conservation.

High-Impact Scientific Contributions and First Data on Many Species; and Supervising Thesis at leading European Universities

Through extensive fieldwork and advanced studies on post-capture survival and trauma from fisheries, the project delivered the very first datasets on some of the least known and most highly threatened elasmobranch species—particularly on their survival, reproduction, and habitat use. These efforts resulted in 11 peer-reviewed publications, including pioneering studies on critically endangered rough sharks (Gajić et al., 2024), little gulper sharks (Gajić & Sulikowski, 2024), and kitefin sharks (Gajić, 2025). Importantly, our center provided the first scientific proof that certain deep-sea sharks can survive longline capture and

demonstrate successful long-term survival (Gajić & Martin, 2025). In addition, three graduate theses from leading European universities have already been implemented at the center, further contributing to capacity building and knowledge transfer.

Since the opening of the Center, peer-reviewed papers published in leading journals (2023–2025) have delivered critical conservation data that would not otherwise have been produced. I have uploaded all of them to our website for free access. Additionally, having published several single-author, multidisciplinary papers in leading journals demonstrates my ability to independently deliver high-impact research that is vital for conservation.

Gajić, A. (2025). Documenting the first neonate and juvenile rare deep-sea kitefin shark (*Dalatias licha*) in the Adriatic Sea, with insight into fishery-induced trauma. ***Environmental Biology of Fishes****,* In press.	Q2	1.8	Read here
Gajić, A., De Loose, E., Martin, A. G., Neuman, E., Karalić, E., Beširović, H., & Gayford, J. H. (2025). Two's company: monozygotic twinning in the small spotted catshark (*Scyliorhinus canicula*). ***Journal of Fish Biology***, 107, 662–666.	Q2	2.0	Read here
Gajić, A., & Martin, A. G. (2025). The first evidence of long-term survival of the deep-sea Blackmouth catshark (*Galeus melastomus*) following release from bottom longline fisheries. ***Fisheries Management and Ecology***, 32(5), 349-353.	Q2	2.2	Read here
De Loose., E., Gayford, J. H., Karalić, E., Annibaldi, A., Girolametti, F., Illuminati, S., Beširović, H., & **Gajić, A.** (2025). Trace element concentration and toxicity in blackspotted smooth-hound sharks (*Mustelus punctulatus*) from the southern Adriatic Sea: implications for consumer safety. ***Marine Pollution Bulletin***, 213, 117630	Q1	5.3	Read here
Gajić, A., de Loose, E., Martin, A. G., Neuman, E., & Karalić, E. (2025). First description of leucism in the deep-sea angular rough shark (*Oxynotus centrina*) and the first documented pigment disorder in family Oxynotidae Gill, 1912. ***Journal of Fish Biology***, 106, 649-653.	Q2	2.0	Read here
Gajić, A., & Sulikowski, J. (2024). From rarity to reality: the hidden abundance of critically endangered deep-sea little gulper shark (*Centrophorus uyato*) in the southern Adriatic Sea. ***Mediterranean Marine Science***, 25(3), 641-649.	Q1	2.5	Read here
Gajić, A. (2024). The first report of adult blue shark surviving severe head impalement by a swordfish, with an overview of similar incidents. ***Marine Biodiversity***, 54(73), 1-4.	Q2	1.8	Read here
Gajić, A., & Karalić, E. (2024). Rediscovery and urgent conservation needs for critically endangered Spiny butterfly ray (*Gymnura altavela*) in the Adriatic Sea. ***Animal Conservation***, 27, 581-584.	Q1	3.5	Read here

Gajić, A. (2024). Exploring the elusive deep-sea sharpnose sevengill shark (*Heptranchias perlo*) in the Adriatic Sea: novel records, health assessments and conservation implications. ***Aquatic Conservation: Marine and Freshwater Ecosystems***, 34(3), e4122.	Q1	2.6	Read here
Gajić, A., Karalić, E., Beširović, H., & Sulikowski, J. (2023). The first record of gravid Spiny butterfly ray (*Gymnura altavela*) in the northern Mediterranean, with description of near-term foetuses. ***Journal of Fish Biology***, 102(6), 1506 - 1509.	Q2	2.0	Read here
Gajić, A., Sulikowski, J., & Beširović, H. (2023). An interesting case of a single ocellus in a Brown ray from the Adriatic Sea. ***Marine Biodiversity***, 53(29), 1-2.	Q2	1.8	Read here

Strengthened International Conservation Through Vital Scientific Data, Policy, Education, and Community Engagement

The project successfully bridged science, policy, and society to advance elasmobranch conservation in the Adriatic and Mediterranean Sea. Conservation recommendations were delivered to the UNEP MAP Barcelona Convention and national authorities in Albania. Simultaneously, we organized capacity-building workshops, collaborated with universities, and actively engaged marginalized fishing communities, fostering local stewardship and reducing negative perceptions of sharks. Through these combined efforts, fishers became active partners in conservation, students and young professionals gained valuable training opportunities, and policymakers received evidence-based guidance. International partnerships and strong media outreach further elevated Albania's role as one of the key countries for shark and ray conservation in the Mediterranean, ensuring that the project's impact will continue to resonate well beyond its immediate timeframe.

Please watch the UNEP MAP training here: https://youtu.be/wJTYZ-lmUmw

3. Explain any unforeseen difficulties that arose during the project and how these were tackled.

The main challenge we encountered was the significantly higher costs than anticipated to open and equip the center in accordance with the highest scientific and ethical standards.
Additional difficulties arose in setting up the rehabilitation systems, as crucial components for tanks and life-support systems were unavailable in Albania. To address this, we had to source equipment abroad, including traveling to Italy to procure parts from one of Europe's largest distributors, and relied on creative improvisations with locally available materials to ensure proper circulation, oxygenation, and filtration. This process was difficult and time-consuming, but through persistence and adaptability we completed the installation and, in the

process, gained valuable troubleshooting experience that strengthens the long-term resilience of the center.
We also faced serious obstacles in importing telemetry equipment into Albania. After more than a year of delays, we decided to use pre-owned systems in order to begin the research. This pragmatic solution allowed us to take the crucial first steps in studying post-capture survival and habitat preferences, which would otherwise not have been possible. However, we are having significant delays with the results.
Finally, fieldwork sometimes presented unexpected difficulties, such as storms at sea and deep dives at night in near-zero visibility. While such situations are part of marine research and I personally embrace them as part of the work, they remain inherently unpredictable and challenging.
Despite all these obstacles, we successfully overcame each one and ensured that the project not only stayed on course but also provided valuable experience and outcomes far beyond the original plan.

4. Describe the involvement of local communities and how they have benefitted from the project.

Local fishing communities in Vlorë were central to the project. We trained fishers in species identification, safe handling, and rapid-release protocols, directly reducing bycatch mortality and empowering a marginalized group previously totally excluded from any conservation action/efforts. Engagement went far beyond the docks, with dozens of events at the rehabilitation center, ports, landing sites, and even local bars. These informal settings built trust and open dialogue, and some fishers became so committed that they were entrusted with keys to the center, regularly bringing in elasmobranchs for rescue and research. Their pride in contributing to an internationally recognized project transformed them from bycatch operators into active conservation partners.

The benefits for local communities were tangible: fishers gained practical skills, recognition as stakeholders, and opportunities to engage with agencies and scientists, while fostering a shared responsibility for the marine environment. Beyond the fishing community, students, NGOs, and young people benefitted through different programs, UNEP MAP workshops, and open days (which is basically every day) at the center —strengthening capacity, raising awareness, and inspiring a new generation of conservationists in Albania.

5. Are there any plans to continue this work?

Absolutely yes! This project is only the beginning. The establishment of the Sharklab ADRIA the first Elasmobranch Research, Rescue, and Rehabilitation Center in the Adriatic now provides a permanent platform for long-term research, animal care, and effective conservation. Its significance is reflected in the fact that the UNEP MAP

Barcelona Convention selected our center to host the first regional training sessions. We plan to expand the program further by introducing two new laboratories (molecular and toxicological) alongside ongoing research, rehabilitation, and conservation work. The center remains fully open for capacity building, internships, and workshops with students, veterinarians, and fishers, ensuring sustainable transfer of knowledge and skills. At the policy level, we are actively collaborating with Albanian authorities to strengthen the Red List, fisheries regulations, and marine protected area management. Hopefully, the work will not only continue but will grow into a larger, regionally significant conservation initiative—ensuring that threatened sharks, skates, and rays, along with the communities that depend on healthy marine ecosystems, benefit well into the future.

6. How do you plan to share the results of your work with others?

The results of this project have already been widely disseminated and will continue to be shared through multiple channels. Scientifically, we published numerous peer-reviewed papers in leading international journals, including *Aquatic Conservation, Animal Conservation, Marine Pollution Bulletin, Fisheries Management and Ecology, Mediterranean Marine Science* and *Marine Biodiversity*. These publications ensure that our findings contribute directly to the global body of knowledge on shark, skate, and ray conservation. Media engagement has been equally impactful: the project was featured in more than 100 regional and international outlets, translated into over 40 languages, with coverage in National Geographic, CNN, BBC, Forbes, The Independent, The Telegraph, Yahoo, MSN, and many others. Several reports and information briefs were also prepared for the Albanian government, other countries in the region, the UNEP MAP Barcelona Convention, and the IUCN, ensuring that the findings informed both national and international conservation frameworks.

7. Looking ahead, what do you feel are the important next steps?

The most important next steps are to consolidate and expand the foundation laid by this project. Securing sustainable, long-term funding is essential to ensure the continued operation and growth of the Center. This will strengthen our capacity for advanced research, high-quality education, effective conservation, and rescue work, while expanding coverage to a broader range of threatened species and habitats. Equally, translating our scientific results into effective conservation policy remains a top priority. Building on reports already delivered to the local governments, regional authorities, UNEP MAP Barcelona Convention, and IUCN, we will continue to advocate for stronger legal protection of threatened species, enforcement of fisheries regulations, and the designation of critical nursery and breeding areas as protected zones. Deepening engagement with local communities is vital. Training fishers, students, and young professionals has already proven highly successful, and the next step is to expand these programs across the

region. By positioning sharks, skates, and rays as flagship species, we can foster stewardship, reduce negative perceptions, and inspire a new generation of conservationists in the Adriatic–Ionian region. Finally, we are a small team of 2-3 persons leading the work and we aim expanding the permanent staff.

8. Did you use The Rufford Foundation logo in any materials produced in relation to this project? Did the Foundation receive any publicity during the course of your work?

The Foundation also received wide publicity through the success and visibility of the project. The Rufford Foundation logo was prominently displayed on all project-related materials, including reports, presentations, posters, and outreach content. In addition, the logo was featured in media releases, social media posts, and educational materials produced at our Rehabilitation Center. The Foundation's name was also mentioned in stakeholder meetings, academic publications, and public presentations, ensuring recognition both within the scientific community and among the general public - given that the Rufford Foundation has a very special place in our hearts and have continuously funded our work form the very beginnings.

9. Provide a full list of all the members of your team and their role in the project.

Full name	Role
Andrej A. Gajić Ph.D. (res.vet.med.)	Principal investigator and lead researcher, overseeing all scientific and conservation activities of the project.
Emina Karalić BA	Coordinator of rehabilitation and laboratory work, responsible for rehabilitation tanks and all the laboratory work
Martina Peša DVM	Doctor of Veterinary Medicine providing clinical expertise in animal care and rehabilitation.
Selma Duvnjak DVM	DVM trainee contributing to veterinary support and rehabilitation procedures.
Hajrudin Beširović Prof. dr. sc.	Scientific advisor specializing in pathology and traumatology of elasmobranchs.
Kostandin Xhaho MSc	Field work coordinator managing operations at sea and in landing sites.
Anis Džamastagić	Technical advisor for setting up tanks, life-support systems, and rehabilitation facilities.
Elias Neuman MSc	Underwater photographer and biologist documenting fieldwork and species encounters.
Andrea G. Martin Ph.D. candidate	Graduate student supervised on recovery studies and post-capture survival of sharks.

Emilie de Loose MSc	Graduate student supervised on toxicology and the health status of smoothhound sharks.
Patricia Conceicao BSc	Graduate student supervised on deep-sea lanternshark research.
Klervi Croisier BSc	Graduate student supervised on microplastics in elasmobranchs.
Olfa Sehli MSc	Early-career professional and intern contributing to research and conservation activities.

I am further very grateful for the rest of our wonderful interns who significantly supported the work done in the center including Rhiannon Plant, Jorje Tsenov, Johannes van den Hurk, Janis Broutin-Renaud, Vincent K. Roberts, Jade Mayer, Klara Carneiro, Maria Hutterer, Maxime Drillon

10. Any other comments?

The Rufford Foundation has supported me from the very beginning of my career and has played a truly pivotal role in my achievements. This support followed me throughout my journey and ultimately helped me fulfill my dream of opening a dedicated research and rehabilitation center for sharks, skates, and rays in the Adriatic. All the international awards I have received, the scientific papers I have published, and the larger projects I have been able to lead are deeply rooted in the initial support provided by the Foundation.
Wherever I go, I will carry the Rufford Foundation with me, as it was the very first grant, I was ever awarded, and the one that gave me the strength and opportunity to turn a lifelong dream into reality by establishing the center.
For that, I will remain deeply and forever grateful.
Andrej

SELECTED PHOTOS

In the remainder of the report, I am attaching the official letter from the Ministry of Environment and Tourism (Albania).

Moreover, please enjoy a small selection of photographs captured during the course of the project and its associated activities.

REPUBLIC OF ALBANIA

MINISTRY OF TOURISM AND ENVIRONMENT
GENERAL DIRECTORATE FOR ENVIRONMENTAL DEVELOPMENT
DIRECTORATE OF NATURE AND FORESTS

To whom it may concern,

On behalf of the Ministry of Tourism and Environment, we hereby acknowledge and endorse the advanced scientific work of Andrej A. Gajić, Ph.D., res. vet. med., and Sharklab ADRIA: Center for Marine and Freshwater Biology and their local partners, particularly in the field of elasmobranch research and conservation in Albanian waters.

Andrej and his team have made a major contribution by delivering the first empirical data on previously little-known, undescribed, and critically endangered sharks, skates, and rays in Albania—significantly advancing their conservation at the regional level. Their work includes extensive field monitoring, advanced laboratory analyses, post-capture survival assessments, international education, and strong engagement with local communities and stakeholders.

Thanks to Andrej's involvement, our Ministry has developed key proposals for the annexes of the SPA/BD Protocol under the Barcelona Convention. His work in Albania has resulted in numerous publications in leading scientific journals and in the preparation of the book "Sharks, Skates and Rays of the Adriatic Sea" for UNEP/MAP – Barcelona Convention, which we fully support and endorse.

We greatly value Gajić's professionalism, scientific integrity, and collaborative spirit, which have played a critical role in advancing marine conservation and informing sustainable fisheries management. Thus, the Ministry expresses its full recognition and continued support for his ongoing work in Albania and the forthcoming book.

DEPUTY MINISTER

Sofjan JAUPAJ

Bulevardi "Dëshmorët e Kombit" Nr. 1, 1001, Tiranë | +355 42 706 222 | info@turizmi.gov.al | www.turizmi.gov.al

CASE STUDY

Recue, Rehabilitation, Tagging and Re-introduction

Critically endangered deep-sea Angular rough shark (*Oxynotus centrina*), one of the rarest elasmobranchs in the Mediterranean

10 individuals recorded, 3 rehabilitated, 2 successfully released upon rehabilitation

Adult Angular rough shark successfully rehabilitated and tagged at the Sharklab ADRIA research center and clinic to track initial movements and assess the post-release survival. Photo: A. Gajić / Sharklab ADRIA

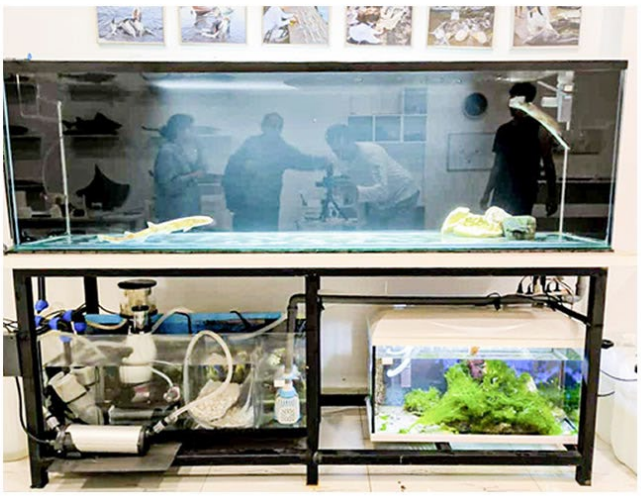
A. Gajić conducting final clinical assessment of an adult angular rough shark (*O. centrina*) upon full rehabilitation and tagging at the Sharklab ADRIA research center, photo: E. Karalić.

Initial assessment of an angular rough shark placed in a quarantine tank upon arrival at the clinic, prior to rehabilitation

Photo: Sharklab ADRIA

REHABILITATION

In this short period, eight elasmobranch species have been rehabilitated in our center – including *Oxynotus centrina, Etmopterus spinax, Galeus melastomus, Scyliorhinus canicula, Mustelus punctulatus, Gymnura altavela, Torpedo torpedo,* and *Raja asterias*



ANNEX – Financial Report

[Intentionally removed]