

The Rufford Foundation

October 2025

Project updates

Last Chance to Save Critically Endangered Spiny Butterfly Ray (*G. altavela*) and Duckbill Eagle Ray (*A. bovinus*) in the Mediterranean Sea of Tunisia



Project leader : Olfa SEHLI

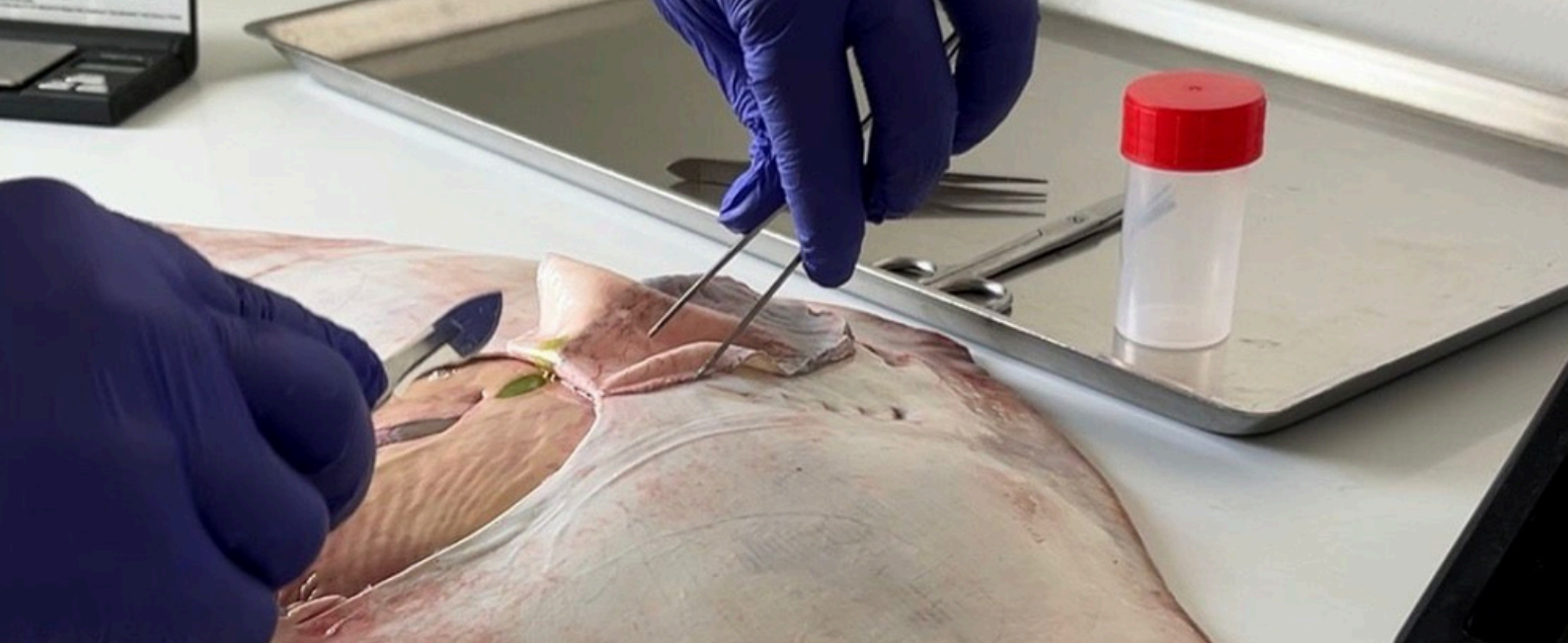
Since the start of the project, extensive fieldwork and community engagement have been carried out to document the occurrence and ecological status of the bull ray (*Aetomylaeus bovinus*) and the spiny butterfly ray (*Gymnura altavela*) along the Gulf of Tunis.

- Conducted a meeting with local authorities to present the project.
- Field surveys revealed a notable presence of *Aetomylaeus bovinus* and *Gymnura altavela* in the area.
- Developed a preliminary distribution map for both species based on field observations and fisher interviews.
- Prospected 130 fishing hauls (missions), between april and september 2025 to collect data on species occurrence, fishing gear, depth, and habitat.
- Conducted biological sampling and autopsies on several individuals to record maturity stages, stomach contents, and overall health.
- Prepared 10 histopathology samples for shipment and laboratory analysis.
- Conducted interviews with more than 50 local fishers to document species occurrence, fishing practices, and bycatch.
- Built strong relationships with a group of cooperative fishers who now voluntarily release juveniles when encountered.
- Presented the project during the IOI Ocean Academy Tunisia as an example of concrete elasmobranch conservation.
- Raised public awareness during Shark Week 2025 through social media posts focused on bull ray and spiny butterfly ray.
- Collaborated with the environmental filmmaker “The Dreamer” on a video addressing shark and ray meat consumption in Tunisia.
- Invited to participate in the SPA/RAC, Plan Bleu, and WWF workshop “Bridging Science and Policy for Shark and Ray Conservation and Management” (Tunis, 24–26 September 2025), reflecting recognition of the project’s contribution to elasmobranch conservation in Tunisia.



Protecting our most precious

Conducting autopsy on *Aetomylaeus bovinus*



Conducting autopsy on *Gymnura altavela*

Specimen documentation:

- Record the date, location, and capture details (gear type, coordinates, depth).
- Measure total length, disc width, weight, and note sex and maturity stage.

External examination:

- Check for external injuries, parasites, deformities, and skin condition.
- Photograph both dorsal and ventral sides.

Dissection procedure:

- Make a mid-ventral incision from the end of the head to the cloaca.
- Carefully open the body cavity to expose internal organs.

Internal examination:

- Observe the general condition and color of organs.
- Identify stomach contents and note reproductive organs (ovaries, testes, uterus, etc.).
- Count and describe oocytes or embryos if present.

Tissue sampling:


- Take liver, spleen, pancreas for histopathology, analysis.
- Label each sample properly with ID, tissue type, and preservative (buffered formalin 10%).

Data recording and disposal:


- Record all findings in a necropsy sheet.



**Conducting
interviews with
fishers**



**Examinations of
different internal
organs**



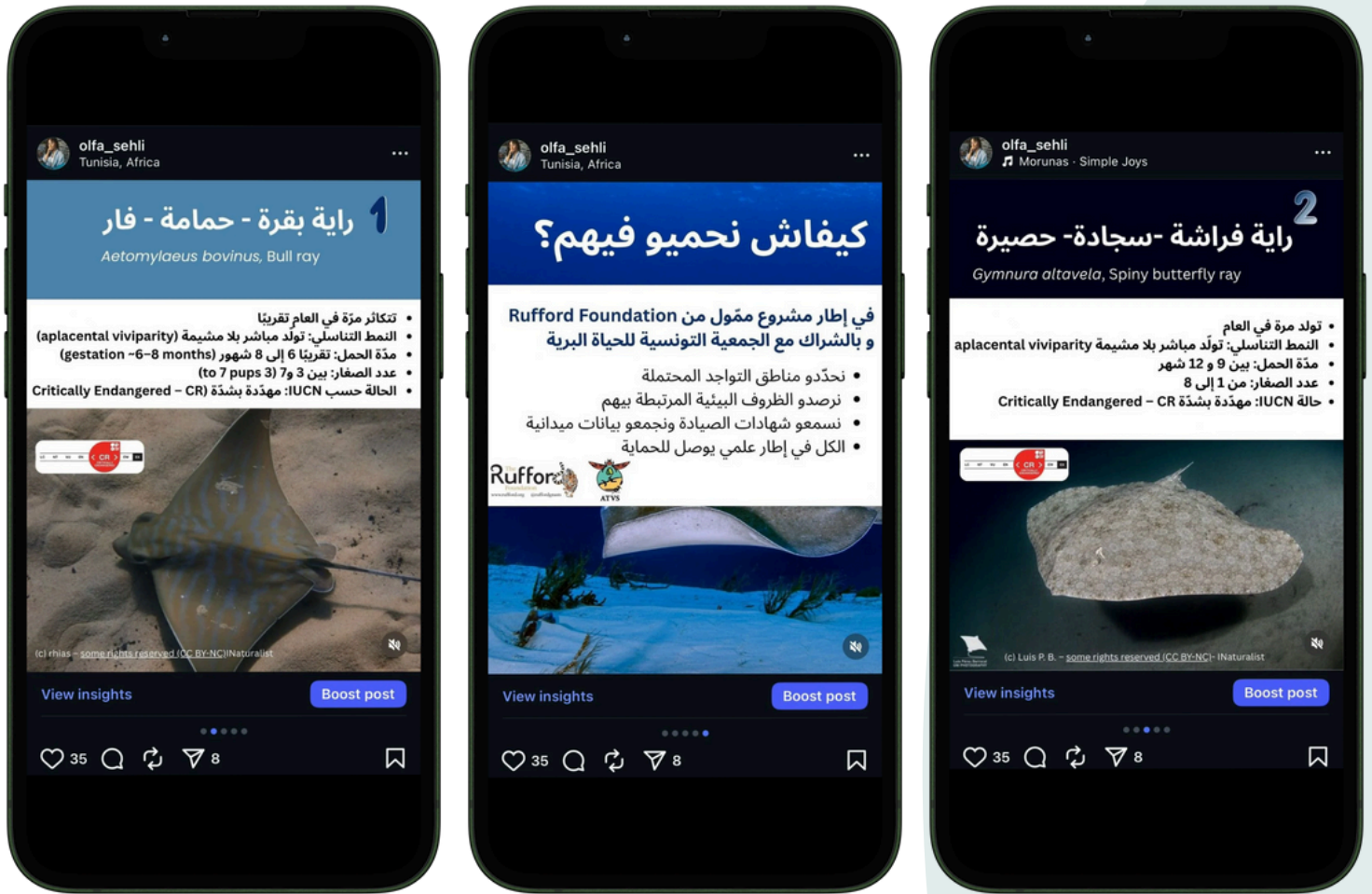
**Measurements
of discarded
samples**

Dissemination and networking



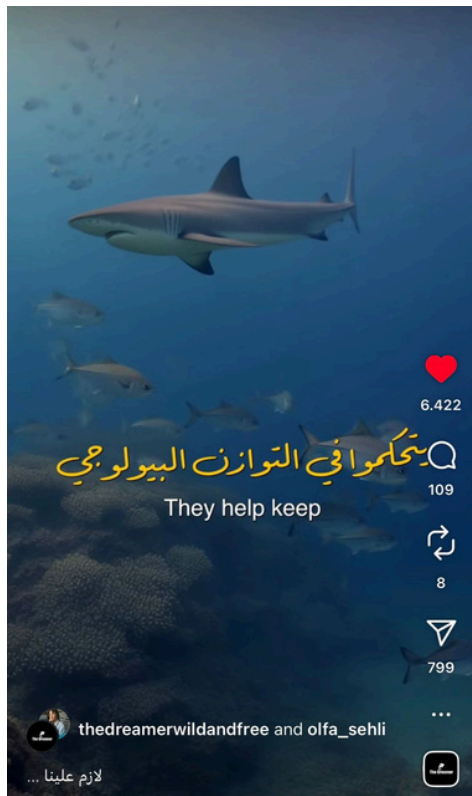
**Participation in the Subregional workshop in Tunisia Shark and Ray
conservation 24-26 September 2025 - Tunis**

Dissemination and networking

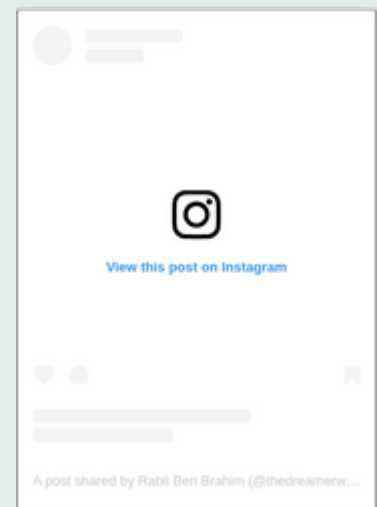
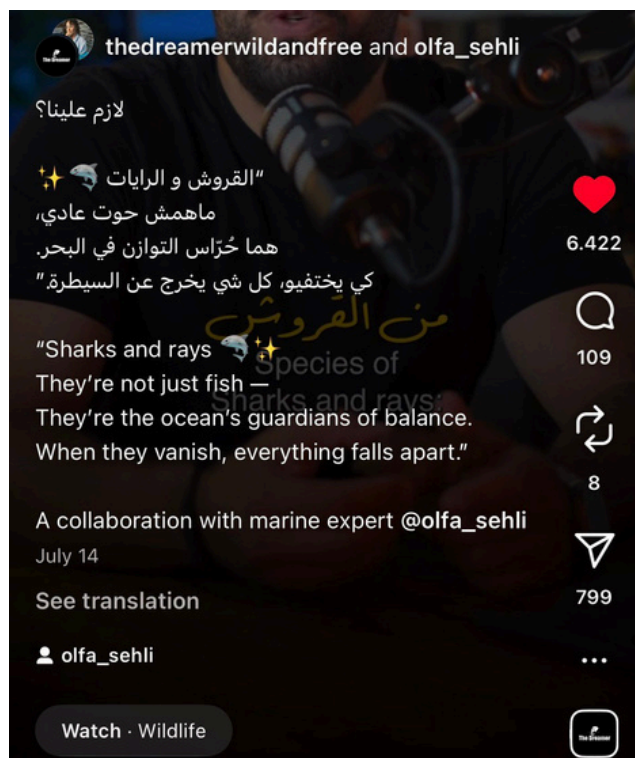


In occasion of Shark Week 2025, we shared a series of Instagram posts in tunisian dialect as part of our science communication efforts to introduce two remarkable Mediterranean rays ; the Bull Ray (*Aetomylaeus bovinus*) and the Spiny Butterfly Ray (*Gymnura altavela*). The posts highlighted their Critically Endangered status on the IUCN Red List and their unique ecological roles in maintaining healthy coastal ecosystems. It was also an opportunity to present the Rufford-funded project, aiming to improve knowledge and conservation of these threatened species in Tunisian waters.

Dissemination and networking



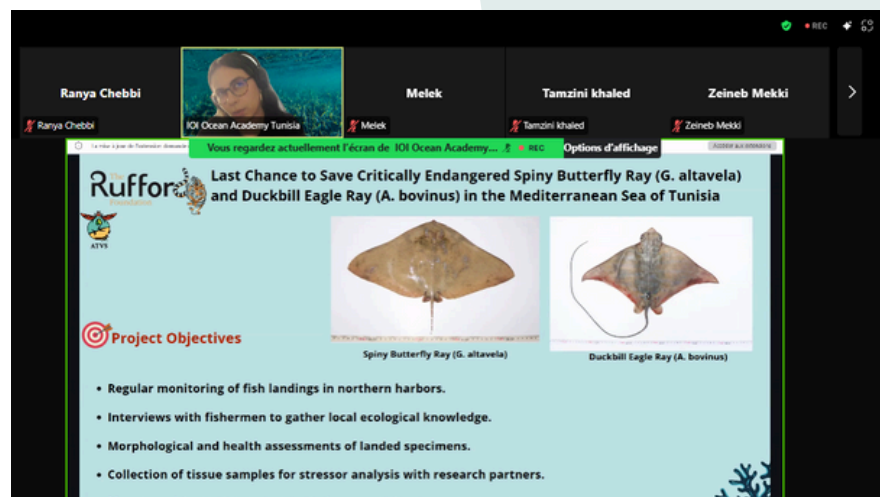
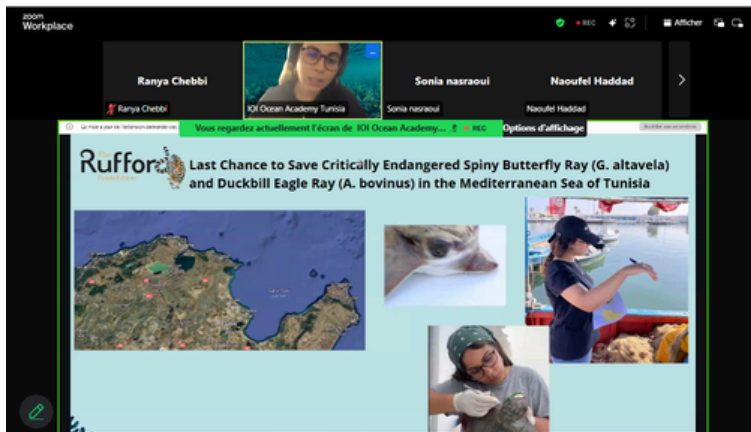
In collaboration with the environmental filmmaker The Dreamer, we produced a short awareness video released on social media for World Shark Awareness Day, celebrated on July 14. The video aimed to highlight the essential role of sharks in maintaining ocean balance and to encourage the public to be more mindful when purchasing seafood or meat products, promoting awareness about shark conservation and responsible consumption.



Dissemination and networking



We presented our project during the IOI Ocean Academy Tunisia online course, engaging 30 participants, including local professors and government workers. The session highlighted the project's objectives, methodology, and expected outcomes, fostering discussion on marine conservation, sustainable management, and the role of research in supporting policy and local communities.





**Thank you for
your consideration**