

# **New stingray species found in Indonesian waters**

The Indonesian Institute of Sciences (LIPI) announced on Thursday it had discovered a new species of stingray — the fine-spotted whipray (Himantura tutul) — in four different areas in the Western Indo-Pacific. Irma Shita Arlyza, a stingray molecular researcher from the LIPI oceanography research center, said she had collected samples from the Java Sea; the Sunda Strait; the waters off Singaraja, North Bali; and waters off the coast of South Java between 2006 and 2008 to analyze the species' DNA. Irma and other researchers decided to declare it a new species in 2012 due to the differences found with existing species in the region — the leopard whipray and the reticulate whipray.

“The identification of this new species is important as we can use the information for conservation efforts,” Irma told reporters on Thursday. The fine-spotted whipray, named after the spots on its back, can grow as wide as one-and-a-half meters and only reproduces between the ages of 5 and 10 years, resulting in very few pups. During her research, Irma said she discovered an estimated 29 fine-spotted whiprays in Indonesian waters. Due to this, LIPI has categorized fine-spotted whiprays as “vulnerable”. According to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), vulnerable species are likely to become endangered unless circumstances threatening their survival and reproduction improve.

This may include setting a quota on how many fine-spotted whiprays are allowed to be caught as well as creating a regulation that prohibits the fishing of the species. So far, some species of stingray, such as the reef manta ray and the oceanic manta ray, are protected by law. Indonesia is the world's largest protected area for manta rays.

On Jan. 28, the Maritime Affairs and Fisheries Ministry passed ministerial decree No. 4/2014 on manta ray protection. LIPI oceanography research center head Zainal Arifin said LIPI had yet to approach the ministry about the discovery.

“Today is the first time we've announced our findings, so we haven't had the chance to meet with the ministry's officials to discuss how we can protect this species,” Zainal said.

He added that the identification was only the first step as more research should be carried out to find out about the breeding habits and migration patterns.

Separately, the ministry's data, statistics and information center head, Anang Nugroho, agreed accumulating as much information as possible was crucial in deciding whether they would pass a ministerial decree or not.

According to Anang, the ministry should consider three important factors before deciding on a policy, namely the population, the relevance to the ecosystem and the influence of human activity on the species.

“We need to consider whether these [fine-spotted whiprays] are considered protected species by the international community before we set any policies. It may take some time, but we need scientific proof [to support our future policies],” Anang said.

According to the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, a quarter of the world's sharks and rays are threatened with extinction, with ray species found to be at a higher risk than sharks. (fss)