

Sharks and Rays: Past and Present

Week 3

Dr. Stiassny Introduces the Collections

Melanie Stiassny, Ph.D.:

Hi, everyone. Welcome to the bowels of the Ichthyology Department. Here we are in the collections. Now, these collections that you see all around me are really the gems of this institution. What we have here, actually, are two million dead fish specimens. And the first thing that a lot of people ask me when they come to the museum, and I take them down here behind the scenes into the collections, is, “Why on earth do you have two million dead fish?” Well, to answer that question, let me step back a bit. First of all, how many fish species are there alive on the planet? Actually, that’s an unknown question. About 25,000 species have been described this far. But every year, about 200 new species are discovered. So the tally of how many fish species there are on the planet continues to rise. At the same time, because, for reasons we’ll get into later in the course, fish are vulnerable because they live in water, we’re losing species at quite a hard rate as well. And collections like this one help us address the question of how many fish species we’re actually losing, but I’ll get into that later, too.