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SHARKS AT RISK: SCIENTISTS SAY EU SHARK FINNING BAN INEFFECTIVE AND CALL FOR MAJOR CHANGE

London: A new scientific report published today (17th May) concludes that the EU ban on shark finning -- slicing off a shark's fins and dumping the body at sea -- is not effective. "*Strengthening European Fisheries Management: Options for Enforcing the Shark Finning Ban*" is the culmination of an expert workshop examining European shark fisheries, trade and markets with a focus on means to enforce the EU's shark finning ban.

The report describes the current enforcement approach of applying a 'fin to carcass weight ratio' as complicated and inadequate, and recommends landing sharks with their fins still attached as the best method for preventing finning. The latter approach was also heralded for its potential to improve sorely needed information on the types of sharks being taken. The report also highlights that the regulation is further weakened by the ability for vessels to land shark fins and bodies separately in different ports.

"The shark finning ban is one of the only measures the EU has to safeguard its declining shark populations, and yet this key regulation is deeply flawed," said Uta Bellion, Director of the Shark Alliance. "This expert advice provides EU fishery managers with the backing to strengthen the finning ban so that it actually serves to end this wasteful practice."

Finning is banned throughout the EU and much of the world's international waters, but lenient standards and loopholes in the EU's enforcement approach allow the practice to continue without penalty. Because fins can be removed at sea under special permit, authorities impose a weight ratio of fins to shark carcasses in an attempt to ensure that no shark bodies have been dumped. The EU fin to carcass weight ratio is, however, roughly double the value used in other countries, thereby allowing wiggle room for finning.

The report states "The experts identified so many drawbacks associated with using a fin: carcass weight ratio to enforce a shark finning ban that they could not recommend this approach. They concluded that an effective and practical shark finning regulation would have to mandate the landing of sharks with fins attached and recommended this management policy in place of the current fin: carcass weight ratio".

Scientists have highlighted the discrepancy between the number of fins observed in the international trade and the number of shark catches reported. In order to produce the

number of fins traded, some 26 - 73 million sharks are estimated to be killed each year. This figure is three to four times higher than the official records of shark catches reported to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization.

“Shark fisheries have boomed in recent decades as international demand has risen for shark products,” added Sarah Fowler, Co-Chair for the IUCN Shark Specialist Group and one of the lead authors of the report. “Shark fins, exported to Asia for shark fin soup, are now among the most expensive seafood products in the world, fetching up to 500 € per kilogram. The effects of this demand on shark populations have been ignored for much too long.”

The European Union, led by Spain, is a major exporter of shark fins to China.

While focused on finning, the report stresses that high fishing pressure, coupled with the inherent vulnerability of most shark species, make the need for effective shark conservation measures urgent.

“An effective finning ban is essential but not sufficient to protect sharks from overfishing,” added Sonja Fordham, Policy Director for the Shark Alliance and workshop participant. “The improvements recommended in this report must be part of a comprehensive EU plan of action for conserving Europe’s shark populations – one that also includes strategies for better data collection and precautionary limits on shark catch.”

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NOTES TO EDITORS

The October 2006 expert workshop was funded by the Lenfest Ocean Program and was attended by a group of international experts in shark research, trade, conservation and management, drawn from ten countries. This *Lenfest Ocean Program Research Series* report is a summary of a detailed report prepared by the European Elasmobranch Association based on the October 2006 meeting. Copies of the report summary and full EEA report can be found at www.sharkalliance.org and will also be published at www.lenfestocean.org and www.eulasmo.org.

The Lenfest Ocean Program brings the best scientific research to bear on identifying the causes, consequences and solutions to problems facing the global marine environment.

The Shark Alliance is a coalition of more than 30 non-governmental organizations dedicated to restoring and conserving shark populations by improving European fishing policy.

Photos and AV material relating to sharks and finning are available on request.

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