



CONSERVATION of oceanic sharks

Overview

Sharks caught in high-seas fisheries are among the oceans' most vulnerable animals. Their low reproductive rates make them particularly susceptible to overfishing in the face of increased demand for shark products. More than half of the shark species taken in high-seas fisheries are *Threatened* with extinction, according to a new report from the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). Despite these facts and international pledges to safeguard sharks, there are still no international limits on high-seas shark catch and loopholes hamper enforcement of international bans on "finning" – the wasteful practice of slicing off a shark's fins and discarding the body at sea. Depletion of these key predators risks the health of entire ocean ecosystems.

This week's joint meeting of international tuna fishery managers from five Regional Fishery Management Organizations (RFMOs) provides an important opportunity to improve the outlook for sharks on a global scale through elevation of their conservation priority and commitments to concrete actions to limit their exploitation.

Mounting threats

A landmark IUCN report on the conservation status of the world's pelagic sharks and rays released last week reveals that nearly one-third are *Threatened* with extinction. Another 24% are categorized as *Near Threatened* while information is insufficient to assess another 25% of species. The report notes that the percentage of *Threatened* species is higher for those sharks and rays taken in high-seas fisheries (52%) than for the group as a whole.

Special species

Sharks are different from the other species targeted and taken as bycatch in pelagic fisheries and therefore warrant special attention. Because most sharks grow slowly, mature late and produce few young, they are generally more sensitive to and slower to rebound from overfishing than the other fished species managed under tuna RFMOs. Threats to sharks will not be adequately addressed by tuna RFMO efforts to reduce bycatch of "non-target species" because sharks are increasingly targeted or marketed when taken as bycatch.

Unfulfilled promises

Over the last ten years, the United Nations General Assembly has passed eight Resolutions calling on RFMOs to improve the management of shark fisheries. A decade ago, the United Nations International Plan of Action (IPOA) for Sharks called on RFMOs to develop Regional Plans of Action to conserve sharks. Two years ago, at the first Joint Tuna RFMO meeting, fishery managers agreed to develop data collection, population assessment and management measures for shark fisheries, in line with scientific advice and the precautionary approach. Today, despite these directives and pledges, the world's tuna RFMOs have yet to adopt Regional Shark Action Plans or set one concrete limit on shark catch.

The exceptional vulnerability of sharks and the important role they play as predators in marine ecosystems formed the basis for the Shark IPOA and argue now for an immediate shift in shark management priority from low to high within RFMOs and individual fishing nations.

CALL TO ACTION

Decisive action is urgently needed to ensure sustainable shark fisheries and safeguard populations from irreparable collapse. To that end, our organizations call on the world's tuna RFMOs and member nations to develop precautionary, science-based management plans for sharks, starting with the immediate adoption of binding measures to:

- Prohibit retention of particularly vulnerable and/or depleted shark species taken in tuna fisheries, including hammerheads, threshers, porbeagles and oceanic whitetips.
- Establish catch limits that significantly reduce fishing pressure on *Vulnerable* shortfin mako sharks.
- Cap catches of *Near Threatened* blue and silky sharks until safe catch levels are determined.
- Close areas of high shark concentration; and
- Prohibit removal of shark fins at sea.

These steps are key to securing a brighter future for shark populations as well as the fisheries and ecosystems that they support.

ORGANISATIONS SUPPORTING THIS STATEMENT INCLUDE:

AILERONS *
Archipelagos *
Asociación Interamericana para la Defensa del Ambiente *
BLOOM *
Blue Ocean Institute
Centro Turístico Studentesco *
Conservation International *
Coral Reef Care *
DEEPWAVE *
Defenders of Wildlife
Ecologistas en Acción *
Eco-Sys Action Foundation *
European Elasmobranch Association *
Environmental Protection Agency, Tuscany Region
Eyes on the Horizon
Fédération Française d'Études et de Sports Sous-Marins *
Fondazione Cetacea *
Fundación CRAM *
German Elasmobranch Society
Greenpeace
Humane Society International *
IUCN Shark Specialist Group
Kenna Eco Diving *
Longitude 181 Nature *
Marevivo *
Marine Conservation Biology Institute
MedSharks *
MEGAPTERA *
Mote Marine Laboratory Center for Shark Research
National Coalition for Marine Conservation
Natural Resources Defense Council
Nature Trust Malta *
North Sea Foundation *
Ocean Conservancy *
Oceania Diving World *
Pew Environment Group *
Portuguese Association for the Study and Conservation of Elasmobranchs *
Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI) *
Pro Wildlife *
Project Aware *
Protect the Sharks Foundation *
Reef Check Germany *
Save Our Seas Foundation *
Seas at Risk *
Shark Conservation Society *
Shark Foundation *
Shark Research Institute *
Shark Trust *
Sharklab *
Sharklife *
Sharkman's World Organization *
Slow Food Italy *
Society for the Conservation of Marine Mammals, Denmark *
SUBMON *
Swedish Elasmobranch Society *
Tethys (Hellenic Association of Recreational Scuba Divers) *
UK Shark Tagging Programme *
Vivamar Society *
White Shark Ecoventures (PTY) LTD. *
WildAid *
WILD Coast / COSTASALVAJE *