



Safeguarding sharks: Managing shark fisheries and ending shark finning

NECESSITY FOR EU ACTION

Valuable shark populations are being seriously depleted and in some cases exterminated due to increasing pressure brought by today's fishing fleets. Despite growing public concern about the threats to sharks and a 2009 European Community Plan of Action for sharks, catch of most shark species taken by European Union (EU) fishermen is not regulated and restrictions on shark finning remain among the weakest in the world. Because of sharks' importance in ocean ecosystems and Europe's strong influence on global fisheries policy, EU shark regulations have a wide-reaching effect on the world's oceans. The EU urgently needs more science-based shark fishing limits and a stronger finning ban to ensure the sustainability of shark populations and fisheries over the long-term.

Valuable yet vulnerable

Despite their fierce image, sharks are vulnerable animals. Their slow growth, late maturity and small number of offspring make them especially susceptible to overexploitation, and slow to recover once depleted. Moreover, because most sharks play key roles as top ocean predators, shark overfishing is likely to cause disruption to prey populations and an overall imbalance in marine ecosystems.

Sharks are increasingly important to European commercial and recreational fisheries as well as ecotourism operations, but these demands cannot be sustained without sound conservation and management measures.

Status of shark populations and management

REU shark fisheries management has improved substantially since 2006, but progress has come late and remains inadequate. Roughly a third of the sharks and rays in European waters that have been assessed to date are considered threatened

"Their slow growth, late maturity and small number of offspring make them especially susceptible to overexploitation, and slow to recover once depleted."

under IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) Red List criteria. Science-based protections for European populations of spiny dogfish, porbeagle, and angel sharks were not imposed until after the species were categorized by IUCN as Critically Endangered in the region. The story is similar for species of deep-sea sharks, as well as the enormous, filter-feeding basking shark, which are classified as Endangered. There are still no EU restrictions of the catch of the increasingly targeted blue sharks or makos, deemed Near Threatened and Vulnerable to extinction, respectively. A variety of catsharks and smoothhounds are also landed without limit. Moreover, there are no Atlantic-wide international quotas for sharks.

The EU has an exceptionally weak ban on shark 'finning' - the wasteful practice of slicing off a shark's fins and discarding the body at sea. The 2003 EU finning regulation relies on extremely lenient enforcement standards and allows fishermen to land shark fins and carcasses separately, at different times and ports. These loopholes are rendering this critical regulation all but meaningless and setting a poor example for other countries.

Blueprint for Progress

In recognition of the pressing plight of sharks, the 1999 United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) International Plan of Action for Sharks called on fishing nations to develop national and regional action plans to conserve sharks.



Pictured left, from the top: Shark fins drying and a spurdog caught in trawl net



Great hammerhead shark

“Higher fin to carcass ratios mean that more sharks can be legally finned. This loophole, and the ability to land fins and carcasses in separate ports, undermine effectiveness, intent, and purpose of the EU finning prohibition.”

The European Commission produced its Plan of Action for Sharks ten years later, in February 2009. The Plan includes sound commitments to heed the scientific advice for shark fishing limits and close loopholes in the EU finning regulation, but progress has been slow.

Stopping wasteful shark finning

Shark finning contributes to an extraordinary waste of public resources, unsustainable shark mortality, and dangerous declines in shark populations. Over the last 20 years, widespread public outcry against finning has led to bans on the practice in many countries and most of the world's international waters.

Most scientists and conservationists agree that the simplest, most effective way to implement a shark finning ban is to require that sharks are landed with their fins still attached. This measure would also improve the collection of species-specific data important for population assessment. In order to grant fishermen flexibility to store fins and carcasses separately, however, most of the world's shark finning bans are enforced through a fin to carcass weight limit.

Shark fin to carcass ratios

The US developed its fin to carcass ratio standard in the early 1990s based on samples of sharks processed under commercial fishing conditions, in cooperation with fishermen. This ratio is the means of checking – after at-sea processing – whether the amount of fins landed corresponds to the carcasses on board. Through its 1993 Atlantic shark fishery management plan, the US set a generous ratio associated with the large-finned sandbar shark – 5 per cent of dressed weight (the weight after the shark has been beheaded and gutted) or about 2 per cent of the whole weight. Blue shark fins were found to weigh only 3.74 per cent of dressed body weight while those of scalloped hammerheads weighed just 2.39 per cent. Scientists have since confirmed the 5 per cent dressed-weight value as an appropriate upper limit for mixed-shark fisheries. The US has since banned the removal of shark fins at sea in Atlantic fisheries, but still uses the ratio to enforce the finning ban if checks are made at port, after processing.

In 2003, the EU also adopted a finning ban, but set a substantially higher fin to carcass ratio limit of 5 per cent of the whole or ‘live’ weight, which can amount to dressed weight ratios higher than 8 per cent. According to the IUCN, allowing a fin to carcass ratio of 6 per cent whole weight would allow 66 per cent of captured sharks to be finned (slicing off the fin and discarding the body at sea). Because of the difference in standards between the EU and other countries, international finning prohibitions use a 5 per cent ratio without specifying whole or dressed weight. This approach, employed to accommodate the EU's weak standards, undermines the effectiveness of shark finning bans on a global scale.

Discrepancies argue for caution

Although fin to carcass ratios vary among shark species, most species' fins weigh less than 5 per cent of their whole carcass. While some fleets may take more fin and flesh off a shark than others, the market demands only the first dorsal, pectorals, and lower tail fins. Excessive fin to carcass ratios mean that sharks can be finned without detection or punishment. This loophole, and the ability of fishermen to land fins and carcasses in separate ports, undermines effectiveness, intent, and purpose of the EU finning ban.

CALL FOR ACTION

Inadequate EU regulations provide the opportunity for continued finning and serious overfishing of sharks in Europe and around the world. European fisheries managers and Members of European Parliament can improve this troubling situation by working for:

- ▶ adoption and enforcement of fishing limits for sharks and closely related rays and chimaeras that are in line with scientific advice and the precautionary approach;
- ▶ a prohibition on the removal of shark fins at sea, or, at the very least:
- ▶ a requirement that shark fins and carcass be landed at the same time and at the same port;
- ▶ a reduction in the EU fin to carcass ratio to 5 per cent of dressed shark weight (or less).

The Shark Alliance is a coalition of non-governmental organisations dedicated to science-based conservation of sharks. For more information contact: www.sharkalliance.org