



**HUMANE SOCIETY
INTERNATIONAL**



Position Statement for the 9th Regular Session of the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission

Manila, Philippines, December 2-6, 2012

Shark Advocates International, Humane Society International, and Project AWARE Foundation appreciate the opportunity to express our views on key shark conservation issues under consideration by the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC).

Our organizations maintain a special focus on shark conservation due in large part to the low reproductive capacity that leaves most shark species exceptionally vulnerable to overexploitation. We commend the WCPFC for identifying key shark species and dedicating resources to the comprehensive scientific investigation and assessment of regional shark populations and related fishery impacts. We believe that this remarkable work sets the WCPFC apart from most Regional Fishery Management Organizations (RFMOs) and serves as a sound basis for conservation action. We remain concerned, however, that most WCPFC Members, Cooperating Non-Members and Participating Territories (CCMs) are still not submitting the shark species data that is essential for robust assessment and effective management.

We applauded the WCPFC protections for severely depleted oceanic whitetip sharks adopted at the last annual meeting, but continue to urge adoption of safeguards for a host of other vulnerable yet unprotected pelagic sharks in the Western Central Pacific Ocean (WCPO).

Our specific concerns and science-based recommendations are detailed below.

Shark Finning

Analyses prepared by the Secretariat of the Pacific Community's Oceanic Fisheries Programme (SPC-OFP) and published recently in *Conservation Biology* reveal that, as of 2010, half of the WCPFC CCMs had not yet confirmed that the 2007 WCPFC ban on shark finning (slicing off a shark's fins and discarding the body at sea) is being fully implemented in national waters, and even fewer have provided details related to application of and compliance with the 5% fin-to-carcass weight ratio limit. While the proportion of sharks finned in purse seine fisheries is decreasing, observer data provide no evidence that the WCPFC finning ban has reduced the proportion of sharks finned in longline fisheries. These analyses support calls for more readily enforceable requirements associated with finning ban.

Our organizations, along with most other conservationists and scientists worldwide, strongly support the “fins naturally attached” method as the most reliable means for enforcing finning bans. Under such a policy (through which at-sea fin removal is prohibited):

- Enforcement burden is greatly reduced
- Information on species and quantities of sharks landed is vastly improved, and
- “High-grading” (mixing bodies and fins from different animals) is impossible.

The technique of making a partial cut (allowing fins to be folded against the body) can address industry concerns about safety and efficient storage.

Because of the numerous practical advantages associated with the fins naturally attached method, the policy has been mandated for most Central American and U.S. fisheries, as well as in Chinese Taipei, Brazil, and parts of Australia, and is gaining acceptance in international arenas, as reflected in:

- The 2007 United Nations General Assembly Sustainable Fisheries Resolution
- The 2008 IUCN *Global Policy against Shark Finning*
- The 2010 Fish Stocks Agreement Review Conference on the Law of the Sea
- The 2012 Vote in the European Parliament (566 in favor to 47 opposed)

In order to increase the effectiveness of the regional shark finning ban and to facilitate the collection of species-specific shark catch data, we again urge the WCPFC to adopt a requirement that sharks be landed with their fins still naturally attached, without exceptions.

Whale Sharks

We remain deeply concerned that an estimated 75 whale sharks (*Rhincodon typus*) were killed as a result of interactions with the region’s purse seine fishery in just two years (2009 and 2010). Whale sharks are classified by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) as globally Vulnerable and listed under Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) and the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS). The lifetime value of a single whale shark to Belize tourism was estimated at more than \$2 million U.S. dollars, while whale shark tourism worldwide has been estimated at nearly \$50 million.

Based on these factors, our organizations continue to strongly support Australia’s proposal to ban deliberate setting of purse seine nets on whale sharks, to mitigate the impact of inadvertent encirclement, and to require logbook and observer reporting of all interactions to the flag State and to the Commission. We also support the adoption of best practice guidelines for safe release of encircled animals. These actions are in line with advice from the WCPFC Scientific Committee (SC) and – together with obligations under national regulations, CITES, and CMS – should go a long way toward comprehensively managing fishery impacts on this globally threatened and economically important species.

In addition, we welcome recommendations from the Eighth meeting of the SC (SC8) for adding the whale shark to the WCPFC list of “key shark species” and facilitating a study on the spatial and temporal distribution of whale sharks in the WCPO.

Silky Sharks

Although their population status has been described as “ambiguous”, silky sharks (*Carcharhinus falciformis*) are dominant in the shark catch of both longline and purse seine fisheries in the WCPO, and the new stock assessment, while uncertain, provides much cause for concern. Most catch per unit effort (CPUE) series suggest that the population is subject to overfishing and more than half also point to an overfished condition. We urge the WCPFC to heed the SC advice to ensure that silky shark mortality does not increase and to consider mitigation measures to reduce impacts of non-target catches. We also continue to urge improved reporting on catches of silky sharks and other shark species by CCMs and support an update of the stock assessment as new data allow.

Blue Sharks

The SC has recommended that the WCPFC consider mitigation measures for blue sharks (*Prionace glauca*) in the north Pacific. We share scientists’ concern over recent substantial declines (5% per year) in blue shark catch rates revealed in four different North Pacific datasets, in the face of unregulated targeting of the species by a large commercial fleet. Analyses prepared for SC7 suggest that this population may no longer be above the biomass level associated with Maximum Sustainable Yield, and that simple catch limits, in combination with improved finning controls (see previous section), are warranted as a first step toward reducing blue shark mortality in the North Pacific. We urge the WCPFC to adopt such measures to prevent further depletion of the population. We also continue to support the SC plan to conduct a blue shark stock assessment for SC9.

Oceanic Whitetip Sharks

Whereas we are pleased that the WCPFC agreed earlier this year to prohibit retention, transshipment, storage, and landing of the oceanic whitetip shark (*Carcharhinus longimanus*), other measures are needed to fully address steep declines in this population (recently estimated at 17%/year). As such, we strongly support the SC call for mitigation measures for avoiding capture as well as further investigation of fishery impacts and the status of the stock.

Other Shark Species and Mitigation Measures

Two mako species (*Isurus* spp.) and three thresher species (*Alopias* spp.) are considered key shark species by the WCPFC and are among the least productive of all pelagic sharks. WCPFC scientists have suggested further research and/or data improvement to identify and clarify population status trends for these species. We support this recommendation as well as precautionary limits on take.

We also support SC development of reference points for non-target species and further investigation into the effectiveness of shark catch mitigation measures such as circle hook use, promotion of live release, deeper hook deployment, and prohibitions on targeting, retention, wire leaders, and finning.

We join the SC in encouraging improvements in the collection of shark data, particularly for longline fleets, including harmonized and sufficiently detailed logsheets that include key shark species, as well as extension of the Shark Research Program beyond 2013.

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