



**HUMANE SOCIETY
INTERNATIONAL**



Position Statement for the 8th Regular Session of the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission

Guam, 26-30 March 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 are deeply concerned, however, that an estimated 7% (or less) of the shark catch in the Western Central Pacific Ocean (WCPO) is controlled (through domestic catch limits), and that the WCPFC, unlike most other RFMOs, has yet to adopt species-specific shark conservation measures.

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

Oceanic Whitetip Sharks

Strong evidence of the serious depletion of oceanic whitetip sharks (*Carcharhinus longimanus*) in the WCPO substantiates the need for immediate conservation action. To that end, our organizations strongly support the United States' proposal that WCPFC Members, Cooperating Non-Members and Participating Territories (CCMs) prohibit the retention, transshipment, storage, on-board sale, and landing of oceanic whitetip sharks, and require that captured individuals of this species are promptly and carefully released, while ensuring that such interactions are reported in terms of number and status of animals.

We believe this proposal is in line with the recommendation from the 7th Regular Session of the WCPFC Scientific Committee (SC7) for consideration of mitigation measures to reduce fishing mortality on oceanic whitetip sharks in the Convention Area. The U.S. proposal is also consistent with the 2011 Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission Resolution for the same species in international waters of the Eastern Pacific Ocean.

The once common oceanic whitetip shark is increasingly rare in the region's tropical fisheries. Scientific analyses prepared by the Secretariat of the Pacific Community's Oceanic Fisheries Programme (SPC-OFP) for SC7 based on multiple datasets documented clear, steep declines in oceanic whitetip abundance, catch rates (to near-zero levels), and size.

Using observer data on shark condition and fate to compute expected mortality by species under various mitigation scenarios, an SPC-OFP analysis estimated that "no retention" policies would reduce mortality to 30-60% of current levels (depending on species) and that requirements for prompt release unharmed may secure an additional 10-20% reduction in mortality for certain species including oceanic whitetips. The paper concludes that a "no retention" with "prompt release unharmed" measure for oceanic whitetip sharks "*would appear to be an appropriate and effective response to recent findings on the depleted status*" of the oceanic whitetip stock.

The same analysis notes that existing information does not allow a conclusion regarding the sufficiency of this measure for oceanic whitetip stock recovery. As such, we also stress our support for the SC plan to prioritize this species for further investigation of fishery impacts and to conduct a stock assessment on oceanic whitetip sharks for SC8.

Whale Sharks

We are 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 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 SC7 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.

Blue Sharks

The WCPFC SC has recommended that the WCPFC8 consider mitigation measures for blue sharks (*Prionace glauca*) in the north Pacific. We share scientists' concern over recent substantial declines 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 next section), are warranted as a first step toward reducing blue shark mortality in the North Pacific. We urge the WCPFC8 to adopt such measures to prevent further depletion of the population. We also support the SC plan to conduct a blue shark stock assessment for SC9.

Shark Finning

Analyses prepared by the SPC-OFP for SC7 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. SPC-OFP analyses point to stronger finning controls as a means to reduce excessive shark mortality.

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
- "High-grading" (mixing bodies and fins from different animals) is impossible
- Value of the finished product can be increased.

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, 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

In order to increase the effectiveness of the regional shark finning ban and to facilitate the collection of species-specific shark catch data, we urge the WCPFC to adopt a requirement that sharks be landed with their fins still naturally attached.

Other Shark Species and Mitigation Measures

We note that improvements in finning controls and simple catch limits have also been suggested in SPC-OFP analyses for silky sharks (*Carcharhinus falciformis*), as a first step toward reducing mortality. Although the species' status has been described as "ambiguous", silky sharks are dominant in the shark catch of both longline and purse seine fisheries in the region, and scientists suggest the number of removals may be on the rise. We also support the SC plan to conduct a stock assessment on silky sharks for SC8.

Two mako species (*Isurus* spp.) and three species of threshers (*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 the SC7 recommendation for further investigations 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 encouraging adoption of the process for designating WCPFC key shark species for data provision and assessment, as proposed in document WCPFC8- 2011-IP/05, as well as general improvements in the collection of shark related data.

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