

News Release

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Small Steps for Shark and Skate Conservation taken at NAFO

Northwest Atlantic fishing countries reduce skate quotas, improve shark catch reporting slightly

Halifax, Nova Scotia. September 23, 2011. Conservation efforts fell short at this week's annual meeting of the Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organization (NAFO) as fishing powers agreed to cut international quotas for threatened skates by just half the amount advised by scientists, and to require reporting of incidental shark catches by broad category rather than by species.

"Although we are pleased that the NAFO skate quota will no longer be twice as high as scientists advise, it is still deeply disappointing to witness another year of the European Union and Canada putting the interests of their fishermen above their conservation commitments and the long-term health of exceptionally vulnerable populations," said Sonja Fordham, President of Shark Advocates International.

Following late-night negotiations, NAFO Parties today formally adopted an agreement to reduce the 2012 quota for thorny skate from 12,000 tons (t) to 8,500 t, just halfway toward the quota advised by scientists (5,000t). Earlier in the week, Canada had suggested phasing in the advised catch reduction over two years (8,500t in 2012) while the EU proposed adopting the scientific advice right away (2012), but in a free-for-all manner that favored European fishermen. The US had proposed a 5,000t quota for 2012 through across-the-board allocation reductions. Parties pledged to reconsider scientific advice for skates next year.

Northwest Atlantic skates are fished mainly by vessels from Spain, Portugal, Canada, and Russia. Thorny skates make up the vast majority (~95%) of this mixed skate species catch, more than half of which is taken by Spanish fishing vessels. Thorny skates are classified as Threatened by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). NAFO scientists have long warned that thorny skates have very low reproductive capacity (due to slow growth and few offspring) and that their population is at a low level; they have been advising NAFO Parties to roughly halve thorny skate catches since 2008. At the 2010 NAFO meeting, the EU, Canada, and the US committed to develop measures in line with skate scientific advice in 2011. Recent reported skate catches have actually been well under NAFO quotas. Spanish fishermen stand to be the most directly affected by cuts, while Canada is focused on preserving future fishing opportunities.

Table summarizing recent NAFO catches, advice, and decisions with respect to skates:

Contacting Party	Skate Quota Share	2005-2007 Quotas (t)	2010 Skate Quotas (t)	Reported 2010 Skate Catches (t)	NEW 2012 Quotas (t)	Scientific Advice (t)
Canada	16.67%	2,250	2,000	50	1,417	
EU	62.96%	8,500	7,556	5,223	5,352	
Russia	16.67%	2,250	2,000	91	1,417	
Others	3.7%	500	444	-	315	
Total	100	13,500	12,000	5,364	8,500	5,000

The US also proposed to improve reporting of sharks taken incidentally in NAFO trawl fisheries by requiring fishermen to record such catches by species. Because of objections from Japan, Parties agreed to require shark catches be identified simply as "dogfish" or "large sharks" while still encouraging more detailed reports.

"We thank the US for remaining steadfast in the uphill battle for sound shark and skate conservation measures at NAFO and other international fisheries bodies," added Fordham.

NAFO Contracting Parties include Canada, Cuba, Denmark (in respect to the Faroe Islands & Greenland), the European Union, France (in respect to Saint Pierre et Miquelon), Iceland, Japan, Republic of Korea, Norway, Russian Federation, Ukraine, and the US.