



Information Paper

June 2003

For further information, please contact:

Imène Meliane
IUCN Marine Programme
IUCN - The World Conservation Union
Malaga, Spain
Phone: 0034 952028430
Fax: 0034 952028145
Email: imene.meliane@iucn.org

Shark Finning

IUCN notes the European Community proposal to prohibit the practice of shark finning by adopting a Council Regulation 'on the removal of fins of sharks on board vessels' that would apply within all EU waters and to all EU vessels wherever they fish. Our understanding is that the proposed compromise regulation now under debate has moved away from the original Commission draft and, as a result, the monitoring and enforcement provisions of the regulation have become highly complex and will be difficult and expensive to implement. A failure effectively to control the practice of finning will represent a lost opportunity to achieve the sustainable use of a valuable and highly-vulnerable fishery resource, under the principles embodied in Community legislation, the 1995 Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries, the relevant international plans of action and technical guidelines of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, and as adopted by the last World Summit on Sustainable Development (point 31 of the implementation action plan).

This information paper provides background information on the practice of shark finning, its socio-economic and environmental consequences, and discusses ways in which effective finning bans may be implemented.

Shark finning refers to the removal and retention of shark fins and the discard at sea of the carcass. Finning and discarding of shark bodies is wasteful of protein and other potential products derived from sharks, utilising only 2-5% of the shark and throwing the remainder away. This practice threatens many shark stocks, the stability of marine ecosystems, sustainable traditional fisheries, and socio-economically important recreational fisheries. It also prevents socio-economic benefits from accruing when other shark products are processed on shore and is a threat to the food security of developing states.

The FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries calls upon States to minimise waste and discards. The practice of finning is clearly contrary to this requirement, and to the guiding principles, objective and aims of the FAO International Plan for the Conservation and Management of Sharks (IPOA-Sharks), which calls on all States that catch sharks in target or bycatch fisheries to develop National and Regional Plans of Action that incorporate the guiding principles of a precautionary approach and recognize the nutritional and socio-economic importance of shark catches in some regions, and that minimise waste and discards from shark catches and promote their full use through, *inter alia*, implementing finning bans. The World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002 also highlighted the importance of natural resource management in achieving sustainable livelihoods for all.

In its Sustainable Use policy statement (adopted by the World Conservation Congress in 2000, in the context of Resolution 2.29), IUCN concludes: "Enhancing the sustainability of uses of wild living resources involves an ongoing process of improved management of those resources. Such management should be adaptive, incorporating monitoring and the ability to modify management to take account of risk and uncertainty". Finning impedes the collection of the species-specific scientific data that are essential for monitoring catches and landings and implementing sustainable shark fisheries management (as required under international agreements and statutes).

The prohibition of shark finning throughout the world's oceans and high seas would clearly yield many benefits. It would promote the sustainable use of shark stocks by industrial,

subsistence and recreational fisheries, the maintenance of marine ecosystem functions, and the protection of threatened species.

Several major shark-fishing states (including Brazil, South Africa, USA, Oman, most Australian states and federal waters, and Costa Rica) have now implemented a ban on the retention of fins without shark bodies. In some cases the ban has actively been promoted by the fishing industry (which implemented a voluntary ban in Australia prior to legislation). These states are now urging others to do the same, particularly in view of the high numbers of transboundary, straddling, highly migratory and high seas stocks of sharks exploited by two or more states. The European Community is currently in the final phase of drafting new regulations designed to ban shark finning in order to protect depleted and seriously threatened shark stocks from the excessive mortality arising from this practice. Once adopted, this prohibition will apply to all European Community waters and all Community vessels throughout the world.

Implementing a finning ban:

The simplest way to implement a finning ban is to require that shark carcasses be landed with fins attached, making the possession of detached fins on board vessels an offence. This form of regulation is simple, enforceable and enables maximum extraction of scientific data from landings. It also maximises fin and carcass quality and value and is therefore preferred by shark fishers and processors (e.g. in some Australian states). Moreover, landing sharks and rays with fins attached will facilitate species identification, promote standardised data collection and reporting of official catch statistics, and eliminate potential enforcement loopholes. This is essential for undertaking fishery management measures to ensure the sustainable use of shark resources.

However, in those cases where shark carcasses are to be frozen on board, it may be necessary first to remove the fins. In such cases, and in order to ensure the ban is effectively implemented and that no carcasses have been discarded at sea, a ratio must be adopted that is relevant for the species captured and which maximises value and quality of both fins and carcasses (by minimising quantities of meat left attached to fins: the highest quality and most valuable fins are those cut so as to leave no meat attached)

Fin ratios:

The most widely used fin:carcass ratio was developed by the US National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) in the early 1990s. NMFS adopted a ratio of 5% fin weight to 95% dressed (gutted and beheaded) carcass weight based on samples of sharks dressed at sea under commercial fishing conditions in the Northwest Atlantic, and using the ratio appropriate for species with the largest fins. This has subsequently been enacted in US and Canadian fisheries regulations. The average fin:whole weight ratio produced by this study was 1.69%.

Confirmation that this is an appropriate ratio comes from the University of Florida Commercial Shark Fishery Program (CSFOP). CSFOP has collected data on fin and carcass weights from more than 27,000 sharks of 28 species taken in the U.S. Atlantic coastal fishery during 1994-2002. [A "carcass," in this context, is the 'dressed' animal – head, entrails, and fins removed]. The overall fin:carcass ratio was 4.90%. . Thus, use of 5.0% as a target figure in shark fishery management plans already allows considerable flexibility for species-specific variation in fin:carcass weights and should not be exceeded.

An appropriate regulation should therefore contemplate either ratios of 2% fin:live (whole body) weight or of 5% fin:dressed carcass weight, as both are suitable for most large-finned commercial species. These distinctions are critical, as a shark's head and internal organs comprise a significant proportion of its total weight.

Exceeding the above ratios would give an implicit permit to fin and discard a proportion of the sharks caught. For example, a permitted ratio of 6% fins to live weight would enable two or more sharks to be finned and discarded

for every shark that is retained, while still producing the 'correct' ratio of fins to bodies landed". In reality, this means that about 66% of sharks caught could still be finned.

Simultaneous landing:

If a permitted ratio of detached fins and carcasses is set, this can only be enforced by requiring simultaneous landings of both products so that their weights can be compared.

Separate landings of fins and carcasses will almost certainly lead to more fins in trade than would be possible if finning did not occur and is unlikely to curb the practice. Shark fins move so quickly through the stream of commerce that there is not likely to be an opportunity to verify logbook records with actual catch. The only way to ensure compliance is to have the fins, carcasses and logbooks available together for inspection at the landing point.

A finning ban is an important management measure that is now being adopted by more and more countries in order to promote the conservation, management and sustainable use of sharks (which are recognised as highly vulnerable to over-exploitation), minimise waste, and maximise socio-economic benefits. Effective and enforceable finning regulations will also contribute substantially to the implementation of international Agreements and initiatives concerning shark conservation and management, including the UN Straddling and Highly Migratory Fish Stocks Agreement, and the UN FAO IPOA-Sharks.

NB. This information paper was developed by the IUCN Secretariat through a consultative process involving input from the SSC network (especially the Shark Specialist Group Executive Committee) and relevant IUCN staff.