



Position Statement

*International Commission for the
Conservation of Atlantic Tunas
21st Special Meeting, November 2018
Dubrovnik, Croatia*

The Shark Trust, Ecology Action Centre, Defenders of Wildlife, World Wildlife Fund, and The Ocean Foundation (through Shark Advocates International) are grateful to the Government of Croatia for hosting this meeting in the enchanting city of Dubrovnik. Our organizations focus on conservation of sharks because low reproductive capacity leaves most species especially susceptible to overfishing. We appreciate the opportunity to participate in the deliberations and share our perspectives.

We are deeply concerned about the lack of restrictions on Atlantic fisheries for oceanic sharks, particularly heavily fished and exceptionally under-protected mako and blue sharks. We urge ICCAT Parties to begin to safeguard these and other species through a stronger finning ban and catch limits based on scientific advice and the precautionary approach.

Prevent Collapse of Mako Sharks

For more than a decade, scientists have warned that mako sharks (*Isurus spp.*) are exceptionally vulnerable to overfishing ICCAT fisheries. ICCAT has since banned retention of several other shark species of lower commercial value. In 2017, Standing Committee on Research and Statistics (SCRS) reported depletion and ongoing overfishing of North Atlantic shortfin makos (*Isurus oxyrinchus*), estimated that only a 0t catch (including dead discards) could result in population rebuilding by 2040 (with 54% probability), and recommended a “complete prohibition on retention” as the most effective immediate measure for achieving this goal. For South Atlantic makos, there is greater uncertainty; the SCRS suggested a catch limit of ~2000t. In response, in 2017, ICCAT agreed a binding measure that fell far short of the North Atlantic advice and did nothing to safeguard South Atlantic makos. Concrete, science-based fishing limits are essential for preventing collapse of these valuable populations. Banning retention throughout the Atlantic remains the most prudent course, given the species’ vulnerability and documented decline.

Spotlight on North Atlantic Shortfin Makos

The SCRS reported last year that North Atlantic shortfin mako shark catches would need to be cut to under 1000t to simply halt overfishing. Just recently it was revealed that Parties’ caught more than 1500t of North Atlantic makos in *just the first six months* of this year. ICCAT’s 2017 measure – which aimed to stop overfishing immediately is therefore clearly failing, leaving this exceptionally vulnerable and valuable population at serious risk of collapse. We urge Parties to now:

- Reconsider the remedy deemed by SCRS as “most effective”: a complete prohibit on retention for the North Atlantic
- Ban landings for all Parties falling short of data reporting requirements, and
- At a minimum, augment the current measure to ensure annual landings are kept under 500t.

Protect South Atlantic Makos

Although the status of South Atlantic population is less clear, a retention ban is prudent in the face of this uncertainty, especially given the enforcement challenges, species' vulnerability, and lessons from the North Atlantic.

Limit Blue Shark Catch

Blue sharks (*Prionace glauca*) rank 4th by weight for species taken by ICCAT fisheries, yet ICCAT has set no concrete limits on catch. Preliminary 2017 data reveal that North Atlantic catches could well exceed the ICCAT threshold established in 2016 (39,675t vs. 39,102t average for two consecutive years). This threshold should be transformed into a total allowable catch limit to better prevent overages.

The SCRS could not rule out overfishing of South Atlantic blue sharks, strongly recommended a precautionary approach for this population, and suggested a catch limit of 28,923t (based on the formula used for the North).

ICCAT should establish science-based blue shark catch limits now -- before populations become seriously overfished and more severe measures are needed.

Strengthen the Finning Ban

ICCAT's ban on finning (the wasteful practice of slicing off a shark's fins and discarding the body at sea) is difficult to enforce and exacerbates inadequacies in shark catch information. Replacing the current fin-to-carcass ratio limit with a ban on removing shark fins at sea can:

- ease enforcement burden
- eliminate wiggle room to fin sharks; and
- facilitate the collection of shark-specific catch data.

The 2018 "fins attached" proposal (PA4-806) has been co-sponsored by a majority of ICCAT Parties; previous proposals have gained support from ~80% of ICCAT Parties in attendance. It is high time for ICCAT to join other Regional Fishery Management Organizations (the North-East Atlantic Fisheries Commission, Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organization and the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean) and adopt this best practice for finning ban enforcement.

Summary

Unenforceable half measures are not enough to save sharks. We once again urge ICCAT to:

- Protect makos
- Limit blue shark catch
- Ban at-sea shark fin removal.

We are hopeful that important strides in shark conservation will be made this week in Croatia.