Opening Statement
Panel 4
26th Regular Meeting of ICCAT
Mallorca, Spain

Our organizations appreciate the opportunity to participate as observers in this meeting of the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) and to encourage the following actions for sharks.

Strengthen the Finning Ban
This year marks the 10th year that multiple Parties have proposed a requirement that sharks be landed with fins attached to strengthen the ICCAT finning ban. Over that time, this superior enforcement method has been adopted by North East Atlantic Fisheries Commission (2014), the Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organization (2016), the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (2018), and the Western Central Atlantic Fisheries Commission (2019). In recent years, this proposal as gained the support of roughly 80% of ICCAT Parties, and -- at this meeting -- already enjoys co-sponsorship from a majority of Parties in attendance. Banning at-sea removal of shark fins not only significantly eases enforcement, but can also facilitate the collection of species-specific shark catch data needed for shark population assessment. We urge ICCAT to finally adopt this best practice, a cornerstone of responsible shark fisheries management, this week.

Protect Mako Sharks
The urgent need to protect shortfin mako sharks is our primary focus for this meeting. The status of the North Atlantic population has grown exceptionally grim due to years of inadequate response to scientists' warnings. Just months ago, the species was added to Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), bringing new obligations for all ICCAT Parties to ensure sustainability. For more than a decade, ICCAT scientists have annually highlighted the intrinsic vulnerability of mako sharks and advised ICCAT to ban retention of shark species that are of conservation concern and have a relatively high chance for survival if released. This week, the Standing Committee for Research and Statistics (SCRS) underscored their recommendation for a complete prohibition on shortfin mako retention for the North Atlantic to begin a rebuilding period that will already span decades. The SCRS warns that South Atlantic makos are on a similar path and advises limiting catch there.

We remind you that ICCAT has adopted, with relative ease, retention bans for many other shark species, based on much less information than is available for shortfin makos. Many ICCAT Parties require that these and other threatened species -- including basking sharks, whale sharks, and white sharks -- be discarded, dead or alive, primarily to remove incentive to encounter and kill them. We therefore cannot accept concern over dead discards (a reality under any scenario) as sufficient reason to justify rejection of the clear advice for a shortfin mako ban.

We strongly urge ICCAT Parties to support the mako protection proposal from Senegal and a growing number of cosponsors, as the only measure that includes the most vital elements of the SCRS advice (a retention ban for the North Atlantic and catch limits for the South Atlantic).

It is truly make or break time for North Atlantic makos. The situation is dire. The advice is clear. The remedy is simple. Please act now to prevent complete and potentially irreparable population collapse.

We look forward to collaborating with Parties to ensure prompt and effective implementation of a mako ban, and to continue work toward minimizing mako discard mortality and monitoring population status with minimal harm.

Limit Blue Shark Catch
Heavily fished blue sharks remain at risk for overfishing due to the lack of basic catch limits by ICCAT and major fishing nations. The existing landing threshold for the North Atlantic is insufficient for ensuring overages are prevented. South Atlantic blue shark fishing is still essentially unregulated. We urge Parties to establish, without further delay, hard blue shark catch limits for both oceans, at levels at or below those advised by the SCRS.