

TRANSFORMING SHARK FINNING BANS

TOWARDS A REAL AND EFFECTIVE FINNING BAN IN ICCAT

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Shark fins landed from a longliner. Harbour of Las Palmas, Canary islands, Spain. 2008.

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Sharks are caught in conjunction with many ICCAT fisheries, either as by-catch or targeted by surface longline fleets which harvest sharks for their valuable fins. The fins, used in “shark fin soup”, generally fetch much higher prices than the meat. This discrepancy creates an economic incentive to keep only a shark’s fins and discard the rest of the carcass at sea. This wasteful practice, called “shark finning”, is prohibited for ICCAT parties but through ineffective measures.

ICCAT FINNING BAN AND ITS LOOPHOLES

ICCAT Contracting Parties agreed the first international shark finning prohibition in 2004.¹ It requires full utilization of sharks, noting that fins should total no more than 5% of the weight of the sharks onboard. It does not prohibit fishermen from cutting the fins off sharks while at sea.

This “fin to carcass ratio” is intended to prevent finning by ensuring that the amount of fins landed is proportional to the amount of bodies landed, and that no sharks were thrown back to sea. However, the theoretical nature of the ratio in the ICCAT ban is problematic because it does not differentiate between “whole” (live) or “dressed” (gutted and beheaded) weights, meaning fishing nations can apply the ratio as they see fit.

The ambiguity of the 5% rule in ICCAT has led to implementation issues with fishing nations and port states that interpret the rule differently. Applying the 5% ratio to a whole shark means that more fins could be landed than when applying the ratio to a dressed shark. Also, different fin cutting procedures may affect the fin to body weight ratio – individual nations or fleets may use different sets of fins or even cutting techniques that affect the fin to carcass ratio. Yet another loophole in the ICCAT finning ban allows fishermen to land shark fins and carcasses separately in different ports. Finally, different species of sharks have considerably different ratios of fin to carcass size², meaning that a ratio of 5% should not apply to all species.

RECOMMENDATION FOR ICCAT

Oceana recommends that ICCAT Contracting parties replace the ratio with a requirement that sharks be landed with their fins naturally attached. This technique has been tested and used in various fisheries around the world. In addition to being straightforward, a “fins attached” policy results in reduced enforcement burden, elimination of “high-grading” (mixing high value bodies and fins from different species), increased economic value of the fins (more precise fin cutting can be achieved on land)³, and improved data collection since species identification is greatly facilitated with sharks’ fins still attached.

MOMENTUM BUILDS FOR “FINS ATTACHED”

Most shark scientists and conservationists agree that landing sharks with their fins wholly or partially attached in a natural manner is the most straightforward, reliable and effective approach to implementing a finning ban. Calls for a “fins attached” policy have been gaining momentum in the past years:

2006

An ICCAT SCRS paper on fin ratios stated that “the only guaranteed method to avoid shark finning is to land sharks with all fins attached.”⁴

2007

The United Nations General Assembly specifically encouraged consideration of the fins-attached technique.⁵

Separately, leading shark scientists and experts examined finning ban ratios and concluded that:⁶

- Fin to carcass ratios are complicated and usually inadequate and need standardization.
- Differences in cutting techniques and variability in fin sizes and values can lead to finning.
- Ratios set at the high end of scientific advice exacerbate these problems.

2008

The IUCN World Conservation Congress adopted a resolution calling on shark fishing states to require shark be landed with their fins naturally attached to their bodies at the first point of landing, allowing for partial detachment of fins to permit efficient storage and species identification.⁷

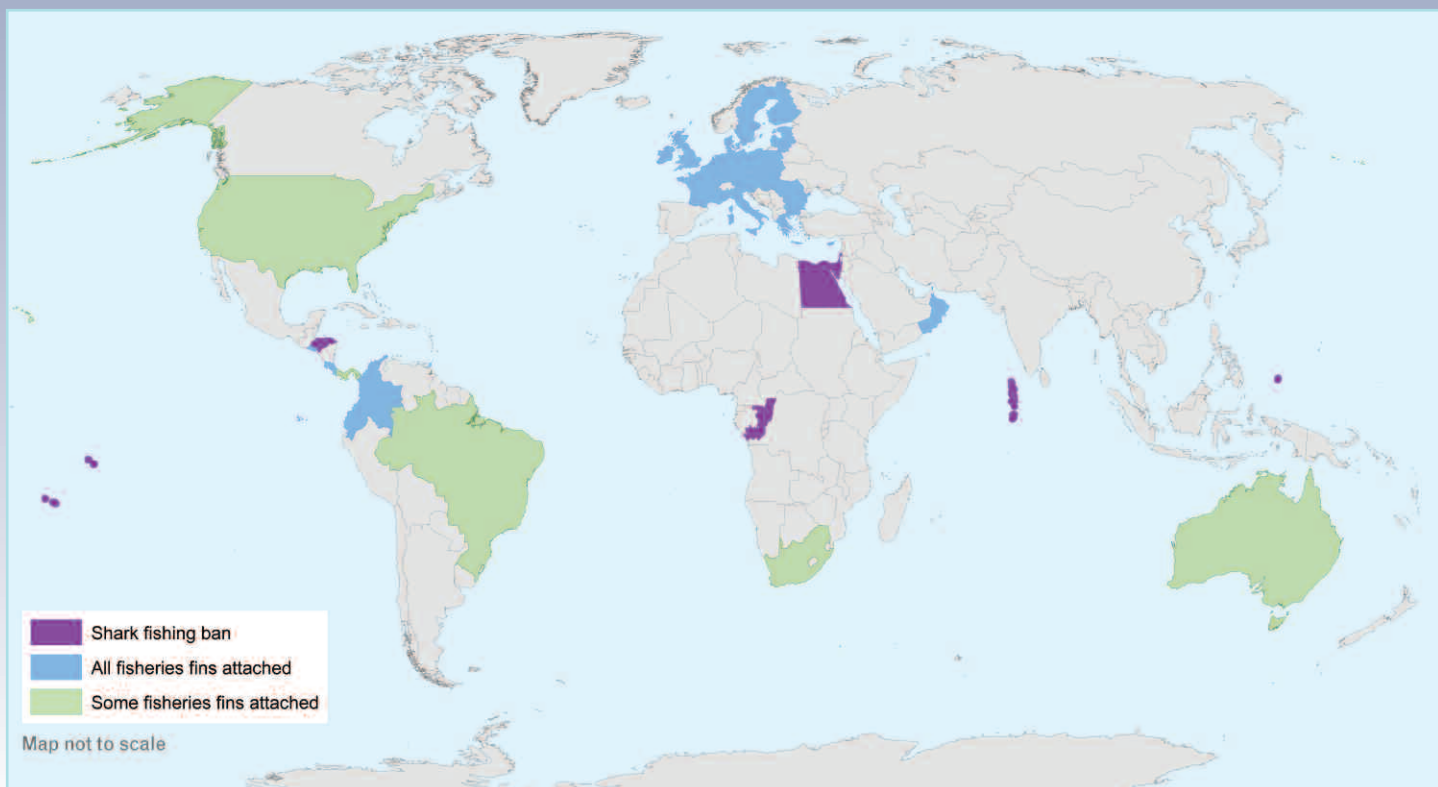
2009

The Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (IOTC) Working Party on Ecosystems and Bycatch (WPEB) recommended that the IOTC fin-to-carcass ratio be replaced with a requirement that sharks be landed with their fins naturally attached to the body. The WPEB based its advice on conclusions that such a policy was the best way to ensure correct catch statistics and biological information and reduce or avoid finning.⁸

2010

The resumed Review Conference on the Agreement for the Implementation of the United Nations Fish Stocks Agreement recommended strengthening enforcement of existing prohibitions on shark finning by requiring that sharks be landed with their fins naturally attached or through different means that are equally effective and enforceable.⁹

Countries with regulations requiring sharks to be landed with their fins naturally attached.¹⁰

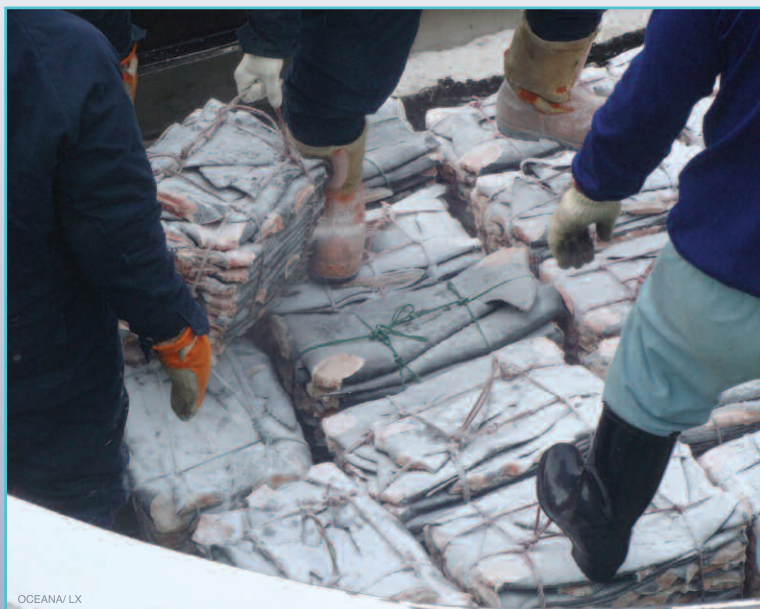


DEBUNKING MYTHS

Fishing fleets and nations sometimes use the argument that shark fins and carcasses must be unloaded in different ports because they are sold to different markets. In fact, shark fins and carcasses are sold to different markets, but usually after already being landed together. This is often true for frozen sharks, and fresh sharks from the same fleets are often landed whole with their fins attached anyway. Whereas there may be exceptions to these practices, landing fins and carcasses together is not only possible but practical.

Another argument used by the fishing industry is that freezing sharks without removing their fins first would make handling difficult and storage inefficient, saying that stiff, intact animals with sharp, jutting fins can be dangerous to handle and take up too much room in the hold. However, an effective solution for this problem has already been found and is being implemented in various countries: a partial fin cut before freezing.

Fishermen also often claim that processing at sea is necessary to prevent fresh shark meat from spoiling. However, landing sharks with fins still naturally attached does not prevent gutting and beheading the shark at sea and therefore does not impact the quality of the meat.



Unloading packs of frozen shark fins from a longliner. Harbour of Las Palmas, Canary Islands, Spain. 2008.

COSTA RICA SETS THE EXAMPLE FOR A RESPONSIBLE TREND

Costa Rica, with encouragement from local conservationists, was one of the first countries to ban shark finning and has led the way towards the fins-attached strategy. To overcome both the storage and safety issues, Costa Rican fishermen developed a method for partially cutting a shark's fins (about 3/4 of the way through), then laying them flat along the carcass, and tying the whole carcass-bundle. This technique allows the fishermen to process and freeze sharks on-board without cutting the fins off. Once in port, the fin is unfolded and cut wholly off of the body.

Other countries have followed this responsible trend. Central American countries following Costa Rica's lead with a fins attached policy include Panama (for industrial fisheries), El Salvador and Colombia. The same strategy is in place in parts of Australia, Oman, South Africa (for sharks taken in South African waters) and the United States (in Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico fisheries).



Blue sharks landed whole. Fresh market in Vigo, Spain. 2006.



Landing frozen sharks from a Costa Rican freezer longliner. Fins partially cut but still attached and tied on the body. April 25, 2007, Dock Coopeimpesa, Puntarenas, Costa Rica. PHOTOS: © WWW.PRETOMA.ORG

FINS ATTACHED CAN WORK IN ICCAT

Some ICCAT fleets, such as Spanish and Portuguese freezer longliners, catch sharks in the same manner as the Costa Rican freezer freezer longliners. The Costa Rican freezer vessel experience offers a useful example for solving the problems raised by fishermen from some ICCAT parties. It shows us how sharks can be frozen with their fins attached and still stored in a safe and efficient manner, without having to remove the fins on-board in order to use all shark parts effectively.

The time has come to transform ICCAT's finning ban, by replacing the ratio with the requirement to land sharks fins attached, thus ensuring the sustainability and future of ICCAT fisheries and its resources.

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- ³ Hareide, N.R., J. Carlson, M. Clarke, S. Clarke, J. Ellis, S. Fordham, S. Fowler, M. Pinho, C. Raymakers, F. Serena, B. Seret, and S. Polti. 2007. European Shark Fisheries: a preliminary investigation into fisheries, conversion factors, trade products, markets and management measures. European Elasmobranch Association.
- ⁴ Cortés, E. and Neer, J.A., 2006.
- ⁵ United Nations General Assembly. 62/177. Sustainable fisheries, including through the 1995 Agreement for the Implementation of the Provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea of 10 December 1982 relating to the Conservation and Management of Straddling Fish Stocks and Highly Migratory Fish Stocks, and related instruments.
- ⁶ Hareide, N.R., J. Carlson, M. Clarke, S. Clarke, J. Ellis, S. Fordham, S. Fowler, M. Pinho, C. Raymakers, F. Serena, B. Seret, and S. Polti. 2007. European Shark Fisheries: a preliminary investigation into fisheries, conversion factors, trade products, markets and management measures. European Elasmobranch Association.
- ⁷ 4.114 Global policy against shark finning. World Conservation Congress at its 4th Session in Barcelona, Spain, 5–14 October 2008.
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- ⁹ Report of the resumed Review Conference on the Agreement for the Implementation of the Provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea of 10 December 1982 relating to the Conservation and Management of Straddling Fish Stocks and Highly Migratory Fish Stocks. New York, 24-28 May 2010.
- ¹⁰ Information based on a comprehensive internet search and expert knowledge. It is possible that, due to translation difficulties, lack of online information or other factors, additional countries with fins attached regulations are not identified. Map files from ESRI.

ABOUT OCEANA

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