

Sharks in ICCAT



Unmanaged, unprotected, and unreported

The demand for shark fins and meat has changed the picture of fisheries for highly migratory species. Traditionally considered by ICCAT as undesirable bycatch, sharks are now directly targeted or are appreciated as a desirable secondary catch. As a consequence, sharks now rank among the key species caught in ICCAT fisheries, representing 11% of all reported catches by weight in 2012.¹

At the 23rd Regular Meeting of the Commission, Oceana urges ICCAT Contracting Parties to act on four key measures to improve shark management:

1. Assess and penalise non-compliance with **shark data** reporting requirements.
2. Require sharks to be landed with their **fins attached**, thereby closing long-standing loopholes in the ICCAT ban on shark finning.
3. Set science-based, precautionary catch limits for the major commercially fished shark species in ICCAT fisheries: **shortfin mako** and **blue sharks**.
4. Prohibit the retention, landing, and trade of highly threatened species, such as **porbeagles**.

It is widely recognised that sharks' life history make them especially vulnerable to overexploitation. Pelagic sharks, which are the main shark species caught in ICCAT fisheries, are particularly at risk, with 63% of assessed species considered threatened.² ICCAT stock assessments and ecological risk assessments (ERAs) for sharks have further highlighted their vulnerability, as well as high levels of uncertainty about the status of shark stocks within ICCAT. As a result, the SCRS has recommended precautionary management for some sharks, including measures to support the recovery of threatened species, and to limit the mortality of commercially fished species.

Despite these recommendations, management of sharks within ICCAT is far from precautionary – most shark species caught in ICCAT fisheries remain **completely unmanaged**. Out of the 350 shark species captured in the ICCAT area, only eight of the rarest species have ICCAT management measures, and four of the five most vulnerable species to overfishing have none.³ Highly threatened species such as porbeagle continue to be landed and sold, while commercially-caught species such as shortfin makos and blue sharks are fished without any limits, even though there is high uncertainty about stock status.

Critical to improving science-based management of ICCAT's shark fisheries is ensuring that CPCs fulfil their requirements to provide data on shark catches, discards, and fishing effort. After more than a decade of repeated Recommendations and Resolutions emphasising the need for better reporting of shark data, ICCAT has now arrived at a pivotal moment. Recommendations 10-06 and 11-15 clearly establish penalties for failure to comply with data reporting, while Recommendation 12-05 serves as a strong reminder to CPCs to report on their implementation and compliance with shark conservation and management measures. Data on shark trade and fisheries raise concerns about specific cases of unreported shark catches. ICCAT must now demonstrate that non-compliance is to be taken seriously.



1. Assess and penalise non-compliance with shark data reporting requirements.

2013 marks the first year in which the ICCAT Compliance Committee (COC) will implement Rec. 11-15, under which CPCs that have not reported Task 1 (i.e., catch) data for one or more species will be prohibited from retaining those species during the following year. For sharks, this represents a decisive moment, after years characterised by “endemic levels of non-reporting”.⁴ Implementation of the recommendation will also present a significant challenge for the COC, particularly with respect to ensuring compliance with prohibitions on retention.

In examining compliance with shark data reporting, it is necessary to look beyond simply the ICCAT Task 1 data. In particular, two types of information raise concerns about specific cases of non-reporting.

(a) Task 1 data vs. trade data on shark fins



Hong Kong is a major global centre of the shark fin trade, and import data from its Census and Statistics Department provide valuable insights into the dynamics of the trade. A simple comparison of the import data with ICCAT Task 1 data highlights multiple cases in which CPCs have apparently exported shark fins to Hong Kong, but have not reported any shark catches under ICCAT. Focusing on 2012 reveals 15 such cases (see *Table 1*), including CPCs such as the Republic of Guinea, which exported nearly 50 tonnes of shark fins in 2012. In some cases, discrepancies could reflect the fact that catches were made in non-ICCAT waters, in non-ICCAT fisheries, or by foreign fleets fishing under access agreements. In other cases, however, such alternative explanations seem unlikely.

Table 1. Hong Kong shark fin imports in 2012, from CPCs that did not report 2012 Task 1 shark data. Quantities shown are total product weight (kg) of dried and frozen fins.

Republic of Guinea	49 707	Nicaragua	8 480
Mauritania	28 386	Tunisia	5 057
Philippines	24 521	Sierra Leone	3 200
Panama	21 895	Gabon	1 221
Guatemala	21 445	Nigeria	540
Angola	18 744	EU.Croatia	400
Egypt	10 583	Iceland	184
Colombia	8 765		

Source: Shark fin import data. Census and Statistics Department, Hong Kong SAR.

(b) Task 1 data vs. information about CPC fishing fleets

Of the many types of fishing gear that capture sharks, longlines in particular are associated with shark catches; in 2012, eighty-eight percent of reported shark catches in ICCAT were made by longliners.⁵ Comparing CPC vessel information from the ICCAT Record of Vessels against Task 1 data on sharks points to additional cases worthy of further consideration. Table 2 shows 13 CPCs that did not report 2012 Task 1 data for sharks, but that had longline vessels, which presumably caught some sharks.

Table 2. CPCs with longline fleets that did not report Task 1 shark data for 2012. Numbers of longliners are shown.

EU.Italy	7322	EU.Cyprus	20
EU.Greece	653	Algeria	6
Tunisia	411	Libya	6
Panama	68	Republic of Guinea	2
Philippines	25	Cape Verde	1
St. Vincent and the Grenadines	22	France (St. Pierre et Miquelon)	1
Turkey	22		

Source: ICCAT Vessels List of 2012-12-11.

Oceana calls on ICCAT to carefully examine non-compliance with shark data reporting requirements, and to fully apply the penalties applicable under Recommendation 11-15.

2. Require sharks to be landed with their fins attached, thereby closing long-standing loopholes in the ICCAT ban on shark finning.

In 2004, ICCAT attempted to prohibit the practice of shark finning (i.e., cutting off shark fins onboard a vessel and discarding the rest of the carcass at sea), with Rec. 04-10. However, this recommendation has been ineffective, because it includes loopholes which facilitate illegal finning.

For example, enforcement relies on a 5% maximum fin-to-carcass weight ratio, but it is not specified whether this limit applies to the weight of whole or processed sharks, or to wet or dry fins (which are lighter and can therefore be kept in greater numbers). A further major failing of Rec. 04-10 is that it allows fins and carcasses to be landed and transhipped separately, which renders control and enforcement practically impossible. These problems are not unique to ICCAT; the many weaknesses of ratio-based prohibitions on shark finning have been widely noted within tuna RFMOs.⁶

Fisheries scientists recommend that the most simple and effective approach to banning shark finning is to **land sharks with their fins still naturally attached**, as supported by the United Nations General Assembly, the IUCN, and the United Nations Convention on Migratory Species. A growing number of ICCAT CPCs, including some with major shark fisheries, have already adopted such policies (see *Box*).

By requiring sharks to be landed with their fins attached, ICCAT would not only close the long-standing enforcement loopholes in Rec. 04-10, but would also allow for better data collection, because sharks are easier to identify when they still have their fins. As noted repeatedly by the

Examples of major shark-fishing CPCs that have adopted 'fins-attached' policies

Brazil
Chinese Taipei
European Union
United States

SCRS, better data on shark catches remain a critical priority for improving stock assessments and management.

Oceana urges CPCs to adopt an effective prohibition on shark finning, by requiring all sharks to be landed with their fins still naturally attached.

3. Set science-based, precautionary catch limits for the major commercially fished shark species in ICCAT fisheries: shortfin mako and blue sharks.

(a) Shortfin mako (*Isurus oxyrinchus*) is listed by the IUCN as Vulnerable in the Atlantic Ocean and Critically Endangered in the Mediterranean Sea, where its capture, retention, and trade have been prohibited under the Barcelona Convention and the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM).⁷ Although shortfin mako was identified as the second most vulnerable shark species to overfishing by longliners in the Atlantic⁸, no management measures have been taken by ICCAT. Shortfin mako is commercially fished, with 20 CPCs reporting catches totalling 7277 T in 2012.

The 2012 stock assessment yielded highly uncertain results, and no management projections could be made. The SCRS therefore recommended a straightforward, precautionary management measure: fishing mortality of shortfin makos should not be permitted to increase until more reliable stock assessment results are available.

Oceana urges ICCAT CPCs to follow SCRS advice, and to adopt a precautionary catch limit for shortfin mako sharks, based on average catch levels from recent years.

(b) Blue shark (*Prionace glauca*) is listed by the IUCN as Near Threatened globally, and Vulnerable in the Northwest Atlantic⁹ and the Mediterranean Sea¹⁰. Although this species is more resilient than some other sharks, it is still vulnerable to overfishing, and sharp declines in abundance have already occurred as a result of fisheries in the Northwest Atlantic and in the Mediterranean Sea¹¹. The last ICCAT assessment of this species, in 2008, indicated that the status of the stocks was very uncertain, and the results of population modelling depended heavily on the assumptions made.¹²



Blue shark catches in ICCAT have nearly doubled in the last ten years,¹³ raising concerns about the potential ecosystem impacts of such heavy exploitation. In 2012, reported catches of blue shark were nearly 61 000 T, making it the fourth most important commercial species in ICCAT fisheries after skipjack, yellowfin, and bigeye tunas.¹⁴ However, unlike tunas, **blue sharks are fished without any specific ICCAT management measures whatsoever**; there are no catch or size limits, temporal or spatial closures, or other technical measures.

Oceana calls upon ICCAT CPCs to fulfil their management responsibilities for blue shark, beginning with the establishment of precautionary catch limits for this species.

4. Prohibit the retention, transshipment, landing, and trade of highly threatened species, such as porbeagles.

Porbeagle sharks (*Lamna nasus*) are Red Listed as Critically Endangered in the Mediterranean and North-East Atlantic and Endangered in the North-West Atlantic. In the North Atlantic, target fisheries severely depleted porbeagle stocks; in fewer than 50 years, annual landings plummeted from thousands of tonnes to a few hundred tonnes. The joint ICCAT/ICEST porbeagle assessment in 2009 concluded that even under a zero-catch scenario, stock recovery would take decades,¹⁵ while the 2012 ERA confirmed that porbeagle remains among the most highly vulnerable shark species to overfishing.

In recognition of its extremely poor status, some management measures have been taken in the Atlantic and Mediterranean. For example, retention, landing, and/or directed fisheries for porbeagle are prohibited by the European Union, Uruguay, and the North East Atlantic Fisheries Commission. In the Mediterranean, the species is strictly protected under the Barcelona Convention and GFCM, with no retention, landing, or trade permitted. Earlier this year, Parties to the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna (CITES) voted to add porbeagle to Appendix II of that agreement, thereby controlling international trade in this species.

Despite these steps forward, **ICCAT has not adopted any measures for porbeagles**. The SCRS has highlighted the need for precautionary management of species which are the most highly vulnerable and of greatest conservation concern. Four years have now passed since the porbeagle assessment was carried out, and ICCAT is long overdue in fulfilling its responsibility for managing this threatened species.

Oceana urges ICCAT CPCs to implement precautionary management for porbeagles, by prohibiting their retention, transshipment, landing, and trade in the ICCAT Convention area.

References

- ¹ ICCAT Task 1 data on nominal annual catches. Total reported shark catches for 2012: 79 598 T.
- ² Dulvy, N.K. *et al.* 2008. *Aquatic Conserv.: Mar. Freshw. Ecosyst.* 18: 459-482.
- ³ The top five most vulnerable shark species according to the 2012 ERA were bigeye thresher, shortfin mako, longfin mako, porbeagle, and nightshark. Only bigeye thresher is managed, with a prohibition on retention, transshipment, landing, storing, selling, or offering for sale of this species [Rec. 09-07].
- ⁴ ICCAT. 2009. Report of the Independent Performance Review of ICCAT. Madrid.
- ⁵ ICCAT Task 1 data.
- ⁶ Reviewed in: Fowler, S. and Séret, B. 2010. Shark fins in Europe: Implications for reforming the EU finning ban. EEA and IUCN SSG.
- ⁷ Annex II of the Barcelona Convention Protocol Concerning Specially Protected Areas and Biological Diversity in the Mediterranean; Recommendation GFCM/36/2012/3 on fisheries management measures for conservation of sharks and rays in the GFCM area.
- ⁸ Cortés, E. *et al.* 2012. SCRS/2012/167.
- ⁹ Simpfendorfer, *et al.* 2002. *Fish. Res.* 55: 175-192; Baum, J.K. *et al.* 2003. *Science* 299: 389-392.
- ¹⁰ Stevens, J. 2009. *Prionace glauca*. In: IUCN 2013. www.iucnredlist.org;
- ¹¹ Baum *et al.* 2003; Ferretti, F. 2008. *Conserv. Biol.* 22: 952-964.
- ¹² ICCAT. 2009. Report of the 2008 shark stock assessment meeting. Collect. Vol. Sci. Pap. ICCAT 64: 1343-1491.
- ¹³ ICCAT Task 1 data **2010, the most recent year for which reported catches are available.
- ¹⁴ ICCAT Task 1 data on nominal annual catches, 2012.
- ¹⁵ ICCAT, 2010. Report of the 2009 porbeagle stock assessments meeting. Collect. Vol. Sci. Pap. ICCAT 65: 1909-2005.