
# POLICY BRIEF

SOUTH WEST INDIAN OCEAN
REGIONAL PROGRAMME • 2024

# SHARK FISHERIES: A POLICY BLIND SPOT

## SHARKS ARE CRUCIAL FOR HEALTHY OCEANS, AND HEALTHY OCEANS MEAN SUSTAINABLE HARVESTS

Sharks, like all keystone species, play a key role in building and maintaining healthy ocean ecosystems. However, their slow growth, late sexual maturity and low reproductive output make them vulnerable to overfishing, with commercial fishers catching as many as 80 million sharks across the world each year.[1]

## CURRENT SHARK DATA FROM THE INDIAN OCEAN IS LACKING

The Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (IOTC) needs better data on shark stock status and sharks caught in association with tunas in order to provide informed management advice. Currently, the catching of sharks is poorly monitored and managed, which has led to high levels of shark bycatch in the Indian Ocean. The IOTC needs to increase independent data collection on shark interactions to be able to inform robust management advice.[2]

## CONTINUED INACTION COULD DISRUPT OCEAN ECOSYSTEMS

Global data indicates that some shark and ray populations are in a critical condition. It is imperative that the IOTC conducts a complete stock assessment to determine whether the same is true for populations in the Indian Ocean in order to develop effective recovery plans for affected species. While this data is being gathered, the IOTC should take a cautious approach by, for example, improving data recording and reporting requirements.[2]

**IT IS TIME TO IMPLEMENT THE MEASURES THAT HAVE EMPIRICALLY BEEN DEMONSTRATED TO IMPROVE SHARK SURVIVAL AND DATA COLLECTION.**

## FORMS OF SHARK OVERFISHING

### Finning

Shark fins are removed and the remainder of the shark is discarded at sea. By not hauling the carcasses to land, fishing vessels save storage space.

### Bycatch

Sharks are caught in association with other target species, such as tuna and tuna-like fish, often leading to severe physical harm or death. Globally, about half of all elasmobranchs (sharks and rays) caught are bycatch. In the Indian Ocean, gillnets are responsible for most shark catches (47.7%), followed by line (27.4%) and longline (15.4%).[2]

## UNDER 'BUSINESS-AS-USUAL'

**1. Inadequate regulations**
Current regulations, including finning policies based on fin-to-carcass ratios, are lacking, ambiguous or under-enforced.

**2. Unsustainable practices**
Intentional and unintentional shark deaths by fisheries continue. The selective harvesting of fins or complete avoidance of shark meat often results in minimal resource gain relative to the total catch.

**3. Shrinking shark populations**
About a third of all cartilaginous fish – which includes sharks and rays – are threatened, largely due to overfishing. The life cycle of sharks limits the speed of population recovery.

**4. Ocean health and productivity decline**
As predators, sharks help regulate prey populations. Without them, community structures can change drastically, with potential consequences for various commercial fisheries.

**5. Socioeconomic loss**
Decreased ocean productivity compromises food security. Moreover, higher catch-per-unit-effort strains the seafood industry and negatively impacts employment within the sector.

**6. Action postponed for research**
Requests for regional data result in delays in effective regulations being implemented. However, the policies that would support data collection are also delayed, resulting in a deadlock while shark and ray species numbers decline.

# WWF RECOMMENDATIONS

WWF urges the 28th Session of the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission to draw on global shark data and consider the long-term impacts of inaction on shark populations in the region. Specifically, WWF calls upon the IOTC to adopt the following measures:

## REQUIRE 'FINS NATURALLY ATTACHED' FOR ALL SHARKS (FRESH AND FROZEN)

A "fins naturally attached" (FNA) policy would require that all sharks caught in the Indian Ocean are landed whole – that is, fins are not brought to land separately. This would enable data-gathering on shark catches, ensure compliance with potential future regulations, and improve the resources gained per shark catch.

An FNA policy would reduce the number of unidentified and/or unreported sharks catches, since preserving the shark's body would allow the species to be identified and its species-specific estimates (maturity, comparative size and sex) to be determined.

An FNA policy should limit shark catch per vessel to reduce overfishing. Combined with adequate electronic monitoring systems and/or human observers, such a policy is globally acknowledged as the best approach to prevent unsustainable finning practices. American Tropical Tuna Commission (IATTC) and the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC) have implemented measures requiring sharks to be landed with fins naturally attached without exemptions in the fisheries they manage.

## ADOPT MITIGATION MEASURES TO REDUCE SHARK BYCATCH IN LONGLINE FISHERIES

Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission observer data indicates that, currently, the most effective mitigation measure is a ban on shark lines and wire leaders, combined with the additional bycatch avoidance and mortality reduction measures proposed by the Maldives and many other IOTC members during the 2023 meeting.[3]

## DEVELOP AND ADOPT RECOVERY/ACTION PLANS FOR SHARK SPECIES

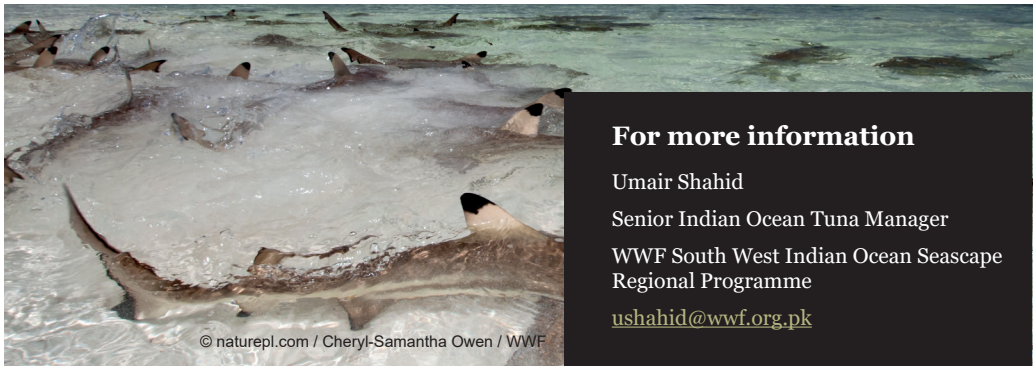
Several shark species in the Indian Ocean need urgent intervention (by as soon as January 1, 2025). WWF recommends that the IOTC:

- Builds on the existing IOTC-endorsed intersessional working group for shark research plans/programs with scalloped hammerhead as a priority species
- Initiates and supports the development of management procedures for blue sharks in the Indian Ocean.

1 Worm et al. 2024. Global shark fishing mortality still rising despite widespread regulatory change. Science.

2 Review of the Statistical Data Available for IOTC Bycatch Species. Document prepared by the IOTC Secretariat for the 19th Session of the IOTC Working Party on Ecosystems and Bycatch (WPEB19).

3 Proposal IOTC-2023-S27-PropR in the Report of the 27th Session of the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission.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