Joint Statement to the 29th Session of the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission, La Réunion, 13-17 April 2025

Sharks are globally declining at an unprecedented rate with more than 37.5% of sharks, rays and chimaeras threatened by extinction, twice as many as were considered to be 'threatened' in 2014. Oceanic sharks and rays are off even worse with half of all 31 oceanic species being either 'critically endangered' or 'endangered'. Populations of oceanic sharks and rays have declined globally by more than 70% since 1970 due to industrial fishing activities and population continue to decline[1].
In the Western Indian Ocean 89 (40%) of the known chondrichthyan species are currently classified as 'threatened'. Although also taken as a bycatch, some shark and ray species are also important target fisheries for both the high demand for meat and the high value trade in the fins.[2]
Sustainable management of commercially targeted shark stocks is necessary for the long-term economic viability of these fisheries. Furthermore, demonstrated sustainable management of shared shark stocks in the IOTC Area of Competence is an important prerequisite to allow CPCs to issue scientifically viable Non-Detrimental Findings (NDF) certificates for the international trade of shark products in line with CITES requirements.

In the IOTC convention area blue sharks, shortfin mako sharks, and silky sharks are targeted for commercial purposes by both industrial and artisanal fleets, and these fisheries should therefore be managed via robust management procedures. However, currently stock assessments only exist for two stocks, blue sharks and shortfin mako sharks. Blue sharks were assessed in 2021 to be neither overfished nor experiencing overfishing, but management advice warned that increasing current catches is likely to result in decreasing biomass and the stock becoming overfished and subject to overfishing in the near future.[3] Shortfin mako was found in the 2024 assessment to be both, overfished and subject to overfishing and stock projections show that substantial reductions in total fishing related mortality are required to rebuild this stock with a high probability within a 10-year time frame.[4]

As organizations concerned about the dire state of sharks at IOTC we applaud the Maldives, Pakistan and South Africa for their strong shark proposal and we welcome the unprecedented number of shark proposals that were submitted by CPCs for this year's Meeting of the Commission on La Reunion.

We call on the Commission to finally step up the conservation and management of sharks in IOTC fisheries and close the existing gaps and shortcomings by adopting the following measures:

For Blue Sharks:
- Prioritize and secure resources to initiate MSE for Management Procedures for blue sharks in 2025 as proposed by the Working Party on Methods (MSE).
- Based on the outcome of the 2025 blue shark stock assessment the Commission should in 2026 limit total allowable mortality of blue sharks, taking into account the IOTC Scientific Committee's advice, and allocate the total allowable catch with catch limits based on the updated reported catches by each CPC.

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[1] Pacoureau, N., Rigby, C.L., Kyne, P.M. et al. Half a century of global decline in oceanic sharks and rays. Nature 589, 567–571 (2021). https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-020-03173-9

[2] Bennett, R.H. & van Beuningen, D. & Bräutigam, A. & Bürgener, M.C.R. & Bladon, A. & Kiszka, J.J. & Leeney, R.H. & Okes, N. & Samoilys, M. (2022) Chondrichthyans of the Western Indian Ocean: Biodiversity, Fisheries and Trade, Management and Conservation. Wildlife Conservation Society, New York: 339 pp, 2 appendices DOI: 10.19121/2022.Report.44805

[3] IOTC–WPEB17(AS) 2021. Report of the 17th Session of the IOTC Working Party on Ecosystems and Bycatch; Assessment Meeting. Online, 6 – 10 September 2021; IOTC–2021–WPEB17(AS)–R[E]: 90 pp

[4] IOTC–WPEB20(AS) 2024. Report of the 20th Session of the IOTC Working Party on Ecosystems and Bycatch Assessment Meeting. Seychelles and Online, 9 – 13 September 2024 FAO Fisheries Department IOTC–2024–WPEB20(AS)–R[E]: 122pp

For Shortfin Mako Sharks:

- In view of the high vulnerability of this species in IOTC fisheries and the outcome of the 2024 stock assessment the Commission should now take a precautionary approach and adopt a Total Allowable Catch (TAC) of 300 tonnes or less allocating this between catch nations to provide a probability of at least 60% for the stock to rebuild into the green quadrant of the Kobe plot within 10 years.
- The adopted TAC should include all types of fishing related mortality, including retention, dead discards and post-release mortality as reported to the IOTC by the species codes SMA, MAK and MSK.

For Mortality Reduction of Sharks in IOTC

- The Commission should consider the summary conclusions and recommendations from the WPEB(DP) meeting in April 2024 that, at the request of the Commission, evaluated the existing science on longline gear modifications to reduce shark mortality with inputs from international experts.
- The Commission should therefore adopt the recommended measure to ban inter alia the use of shark lines and wire trace leaders in all fishing vessels fishing in the IOTC area of competence in the IOTC Area of Competence.
- The Commission should adopt the two-step approach proposed in IOTC-2025-S29-PropT[E] to ban shark lines from beginning of 2026 and wire traces from beginning of 2027

For all Sharks of the Subclass of Chondrichthyes

- The Commission should update Resolution 17/05 removing the existing exceptions and require CPCs to prohibit the removal of shark fins on board vessels without exceptions to mandate all CPCs to "*prohibit the landing, retention on-board, transhipment and carrying of shark fins which are not naturally attached to the shark carcass until the first point of landing*" as proposed in IOTC-2025-S29-PropK[E]

For Gillnets

- The Commission should task the Scientific Committee and the Working Party on Ecosystems and Bycatch (WPEB) to prioritize research on measures to reduce shark bycatch and bycatch mortality for all gear types taking a gear specific approach as proposed in IOTC-2025-S29-PropE[E] and starting with gillnets in 2026.
- Existing bycatch mitigation studies[5,6] suggest that installing green LED lights on gillnets results in significant reductions in the bycatch of elasmobranchs, sea turtles and other ETP species.
- The Commission should task the Scientific Committee and the WPEB to carry out studies to validate these findings as part of its Program of Work for 2026.

[5] Senko et al 2022 Senko Jesse F., Peckham S. Hoyt, l Aguilar-Ramirez Danie, Wang John H., Net illumination reduces fisheries bycatch, maintains catch value, and increases operational efficiency, Current Biology, Volume 32, Issue 4, 2022, Pages 911-918.e2, ISSN 0960-9822, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2021.12.050)

[6] Allman P, Agyekumhene A, Stemle L. Gillnet illumination as an effective measure to reduce sea turtle bycatch. Conserv Biol. 2021 Jun;35(3):967-975. doi: 10.1111/cobi.13647. Epub 2020 Dec 30. PMID: 33000519.

We invite you to join us on April 14th at 1:00 pm,
Saint-Denis Conference Centre, Cardinal Room for

TURNING THE TIDE FOR SHARKS AT IOTC

Coffee & Sweets
to discuss shark conservation and management measures for the future of tuna fisheries and healthy ecosystems in the Indian Ocean.

TURNING THE TIDE FOR SHARKS AT IOTC

Saint-Denis Conference Centre, Cardinal Room on April 14th at 1:00 pm

Welcome and Introduction
Dr Iris Ziegler
Head Fisheries Policies & Ocean Advocacy
Deutsche Stiftung Meeresschutz (DSM)

Fins Naturally Attached is the only truly enforcable measure to ban finning
Benoît Marcoux
DG Mare
The European Union

Reducing bycatch mortality for sharks in artisanal fleets – focus gillnets
Umair Shahid
Senior Indian Ocean Tuna Manager
WWF

TACs and Management Procedures for commercially fished sharks (blue shark, shortfin mako)
Glen Holmes
Senior Officer International Fisheries
The Pews Charitable Trusts

Banning shark lines and wire traces to reduce mortality of critically endangered sharks in longline fisheries
Dr. Hussain Sinan
DG Fisheries and Ocean Resource Management, The Republic of Maldives

Q&A and Discussion