

29TH SESSION

INDIAN OCEAN TUNA COMMISSION

The 29th Session of the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (IOTC) offers a critical opportunity to consolidate, strengthen, and expand vital safeguards for the region's exceptionally vulnerable shark species. Immediate action – based on science and the precautionary approach – is urgently warranted to reverse population declines and ensure long-term sustainability.

MAKOS ON DECK

A new stock assessment finds that the Indian Ocean Mako Shark population is overfished and experiencing overfishing. Scientists recommend that catches not exceed 40% of 2020-2022 averages.

Mako Sharks are particularly susceptible to overfishing due to exceptionally low reproductive rates. The 2018 Ecological Risk Assessment by the IOTC Working Party on Ecosystems and Bycatch ranked the Shortfin Mako as the most vulnerable shark species with respect to longline gear and the fourth most vulnerable shark for purse seine gear. These factors warrant an especially precautionary management approach.

Live-release requirements are wholly insufficient, especially considering makos' high commercial value and associated incentives that could drive long sets and poor handling. Because makos have a relatively high chance of surviving capture if properly released, they are well suited for catch limits.

The serious depletion of North Atlantic Shortfin Makos that resulted from inadequate management (and led to international bans on retention and trade) should serve as a cautionary tale.

REQUESTED ACTION

Immediate establishment and allocation of Mako Shark catch limits that are:

- ▶ applicable to both Shortfin and Longfin Makos;
- ▶ inclusive of landings as well as dead discards and post-release mortality; and
- ▶ associated with at least a 60% probability for rebuilding within 10 years.



OTHER SHARK SPECIES AT RISK

Highly threatened Oceanic Whitetip, Thresher, and Whale Sharks are in urgent need of bycatch mitigation measures to augment the IOTC's vital retention bans.

Of particular concern is the finding by IOTC scientists that roughly half of the Critically Endangered Oceanic Whitetip Sharks caught in the region's longline fisheries are dead at haulback. A ban on shark lines and wire leaders could reduce this mortality by more than 40%¹ and can serve as stop-gap safeguard for other imperilled species that remain unprotected in the region, such as Silky Sharks. Mobula Rays are exceptionally vulnerable species in the same subclass as sharks (Elasmobranchii).

It has been four years since the IOTC Scientific Committee warned that regional landings of Blue Sharks were likely to drive the population to depletion "in the near future".

Across the board, better data on the sharks taken in Indian Ocean fisheries is urgently needed.

REQUESTED ACTION

- ▶ Support an IOTC ban on shark lines and wire leaders as proposed by the Maldives, Pakistan and South Africa (Proposal T);
- ▶ Include Mobula Rays in any comprehensive IOTC "shark" actions and end exceptions to the retention ban (Res. 19/03);
- ▶ Ensure the Blue Shark population assessment (including threshold and target reference points in line with Proposal T) is completed this year and prepare for the adoption of advised measures in 2026;
- ▶ Support elements of Proposal T aimed at increasing compliance with shark catch reporting requirements and advancing bycatch mitigation; and
- ▶ Immediately increase observer coverage rates (human and electronic) for industrial tuna vessels from the current 5% requirement and adopt a timeline to reach 100% coverage.

¹Bigelow K, Carvalho F (2021) Project 101. In: WCPFC Scientific Committee 17th Regular Session. WCPFC-SC17-2021/EB-WP-01



FOCUS ON THE FINNING BAN

Finning (the wasteful practice of slicing off a shark's fins and discarding the body at sea) has been banned by Regional Fisheries Management Organizations around the world and by most of their member countries. To enforce these bans, experts overwhelmingly recommend requirements that sharks are landed with their fins still naturally attached to:

- simplify compliance monitoring;
- prevent "high-grading" (mixing bodies and fins from different animals); and
- improve data on the species composition and quantities of shark landings.

Allowing partial cutting and folding fins against shark bodies can address safety and storage concerns. EU fishermen use this practice for frozen as well as fresh sharks.

Recognized as the only fool-proof means to ensure that finning did not occur, fins-naturally-attached policies have also been adopted by other key regional fisheries bodies, including the 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).

The Marine Stewardship Council's latest standard requires fins-naturally-attached policies for all fisheries that retain sharks. A full range of non-governmental organizations — from animal welfare groups and scientific societies to aquaria and sustainable fisheries coalitions — strongly support expanded adoption of this safeguard.

Because IOTC's move to a fins-naturally-attached approach in 2017 was not complete (allowing continued at-sea fin removal for frozen sharks), the finning ban still relies in part on a complicated fin-to-carcass weight ratio that the IOTC Scientific Committee deemed "ineffective for implementation, enforcement, and monitoring".

The complexity and leniency of IOTC's current fin-to-carcass weight ratio limit for frozen sharks makes it exceptionally challenging to determine if IOTC vessels are finning sharks, especially given the exceptionally low observer coverage for longline fisheries.

Any exceptions to the fins-naturally attached requirement seriously undermine its simplicity and effectiveness, risking undetected finning and a waste of sharks.

Of particular concern with respect to finning in the Indian Ocean are the guitarfishes and wedgefishes of the order Rhinopristiformes. This group includes some of the world's most endangered rays whose dorsal fins are exceptionally prized for use in shark fin soup.

REQUESTED ACTION

- ▶ **End all exceptions to the fins-naturally-attached requirements of the IOTC finning ban (extend the ban on at-sea fin removal to frozen sharks), in line with scientific advice;**
- ▶ **Define "Sharks" as proposed in Proposal T: "all species belonging to the eight orders of Selachimorpha (Carcharhiniformes, Lamniformes, Orectolobiformes, Heterodontiformes, Squaliformes, Squatiniformes, Hexanchiformes, and Pristiophoriformes) as well as all species of the order of Rhinopristiformes"; and**
- ▶ **Include the unambiguous definition of "full utilisation" proposed by the EU (Proposal K): "retention by the fishing vessels of all parts of the shark excepting head, guts and skins, to the first point of landing".**

The Shark League was formed to advance responsible regional shark and ray conservation policies.

sharkleague.org



**Ecology
Action
Centre**

funded by:

**BIG
SHARK
Pledge**

**Point of Contact at IOTC 2025:
Ali Hood ali@sharktrust.org**