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Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission
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Statement to the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission
19th Regular Session of the Scientific Committee
August 16-24 2023, Koror, Palau

Dear Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission,

We appreciate the opportunity to participate as an observer at the 19th Regular Session of the Scientific Committee (SC19) and thank the Chair, Members, and Secretariat for convening the meeting in a hybrid format.

SHARKPROJECT International is a marine conservation NGO focusing on healthy marine ecosystems and healthy shark populations, a 'conditio sine qua non' for healthy oceans that can support seafood supplies for this and future generations and contribute to combatting climate change. Therefore, SHARKPROJECT continues calling for a global transition to ecosystem-based fishery management for ALL stocks whether target species or bycatch, applying best available science and in the absence of data following a precautionary approach to immediately stop overfishing and rebuild depleted stocks.

We wish to thank the WCPFC for their ongoing leadership in decreasing shark bycatch, and applaud the recent decision to ban the use of wire leaders and shark lines in order to reduce mortality of *Carcharhinus falciformis* and *Carcharhinus longimanus* when hooked as a bycatch in longline fisheries. We strongly urge the WCPFC to continue to make shark conservation a priority.

Sharks are globally facing a crisis due to fishing pressure and the ongoing shark fin trade. More than half of all pelagic shark and ray species are now globally endangered or critically endangered, and the abundance of pelagic sharks and rays has decreased by more than 71% over the last 50 years due to the impact of industrial fishing[1]. Overfishing is a universal threat, "affecting all 391 threatened chondrichthyan species and is the sole threat for 67.3% of species"[2]. Sharks are particularly vulnerable to overfishing, owing to their slow growth, late maturation, and their low number of offspring, and by the same token population

[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).
[2] Dulvy NK, Pacoureau N, Rigby CL, et al. Overfishing drives over one-third of all sharks and rays toward a global extinction crisis. Curr Biol. 2021;31(21):4773-4787.e8.

recovery can take decades[3]. The decline of shark populations is not only ecologically concerning but also has significant economic consequences. As apex predators sharks play a crucial role in regulating marine ecosystems, and their disappearance could have cascading effects on other marine organisms, leading to damaging consequences for fisheries and marine ecosystems.[4]

Despite the fact that many stocks are globally at the brink of collapse, sharks continue to be targeted by both industrial and artisanal fisheries - without adequate management, subject to poor monitoring, having little if any reporting of mortality, and virtually without catch limits in place. The majority of chondrichthyan species still have uncertain stock status due to a lack of reporting of discards and size sampling, and due to ongoing finning and other IUU activities. Poor observer coverage and poor reporting quality hinders confident stock assessment, and subsequently no management and conservation measures are implemented to protect stocks from being overfished, creating a vicious cycle of poor data and lack of sustainable management. The high market value of shark fins further fuels this vicious cycle despite existing finning bans, which are often poorly implemented, not enforced, and too ambiguous to allow for prosecution of offenses.

Fins Naturally Attached and the Shark Conservation Management Measure

We are concerned that the current WCPFC Shark CMM (CMM 2022-04) continues to allow multiple exceptions, including artificial re-attachment and fin tagging, to Fins Naturally Attached (FNA) that are both incongruent with and seriously undermine the effectiveness of an FNA policy. A Fins Naturally Attached policy accompanied by adequate monitoring is well-established globally as the only effective method to enforce a shark finning ban, and its implementation is proven feasible by the wide range of jurisdictions and fisheries who have already successfully adopted it. An analysis of the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC's) policy on shark finning and the opportunity for adoption of a 'Fins Naturally Attached' policy in the MSC fisheries Standard Review was conducted in 2021. The study evaluated the effectiveness of various measures in enacting shark finning bans - including FNA, fin-to-carcass ratios, and fins artificially re-attached – and found that approaches other than FNA are not effective, because all contain substantial inadequacies and loopholes that complicate monitoring and hinder enforcement. We also note that FNA without exception has now been in place for years in multiple management organizations and states including the European Union, the United States, Canada, NAFO, and GFCM, and is no longer just a feasible "best practice" but increasingly a minimum requirement for sustainable fisheries management. Having an FNA policy – with no exceptions - in place is therefore now also a mandatory requirement for all fisheries that aspire MSC certification under the new Fisheries Standard v3.0 that came into force on May 1st 2023. Allowing exceptions to FNA undermines the very purpose of any such policy, as ultimately these exceptions tend to become the rule. Furthermore, the allowed exceptions make enforcement complex and time consuming, and requires higher degree of independent monitoring, respectively observer coverage. FNA without exceptions makes enforcement simple and unambiguous - if fins are discovered, for example during an inspection at sea or at port, it is clear that a breach has taken place.

3 Tolotti MT, Bach P, Hazin F, Travassos P, Dagorn L. Vulnerability of the Oceanic Whitetip Shark to Pelagic Longline Fisheries. PLoS One. 2015 Oct 22;10(10):e0141396.

4 Ferretti F, Worm B, Britten GL, Heithaus MR, Lotze HK. Patterns and ecosystem consequences of shark declines in the ocean. Ecol Lett. 2010 Aug 1;13(8):1055-71.

Alongside catch limits, retention bans, and bycatch reduction measures, eliminating finning by enacting FNA without exception is essential to prevent the extinction of many shark species and the destabilising impact this will have on marine ecosystems. **We strongly urge the WCPFC scientific committee to recommend revision of the Shark CMM to require that shark fins be naturally attached without exceptions, thereby banning the removal of fins at sea, the retention, transshipment and landing of detached shark fins for all vessels operating in the area of competence of the WCPFC, and requiring all retained sharks to be landed with all fins naturally attached to the carcass.**

Data Collection and Stock Assessment

We also urge the Scientific Committee to intensify efforts for collection of data to assist reliable stock assessments from which the population status of shark species in WCPFC can be determined, and to start establishing reference points for ecosystem-based mortality limits for the active management of shark populations. Precautionary mortality limits and allocated catch quotas are badly needed to keep shark populations healthy, especially given the limitations and uncertainty of current stock assessments. Most of the world's shark catch is not monitored or managed. Globally only 3% of all chondrichthyan species have a formal stock assessment, and protections for threatened species are not always enforced[5] and reporting often inadequate.

Current stock assessments often do not allow reliable biomass projections, e.g. for Southwest Pacific shortfin Mako sharks, SC18 found that the stock status remains unknown. Therefore no management advice has been provided and no specific management measures taken to prevent overfishing of this species in WCPFC. Suggesting that "CPCs should continue to release" bycaught mako sharks appears in view of the unknown stock status to be a rather weak measure, knowing that this species is highly vulnerable to overfishing and that overfished populations will take several decades to recover. Furthermore, as no established reference points for pelagic sharks exist, current assessments continue to be based on MSY, which may be completely misleading as it does not take historical population size into account nor support resilient shark populations within an ecosystem-based management of fisheries. Although catch data is improving slowly with regard to species specificity, up to half of catches are still only coded as generic "shark" especially in the longline fisheries. For shortfin mako sharks, recent retention prohibition in other RFMOs may likely put the population in the WCPFC under even higher fishing pressure. At the very least accurate discard reporting and a precautionary mortality limit with allocated quota needs to be implemented.

Blue sharks are the most widely fished shark both globally and at WCPFC, and yet no HCRs or at least TACs are in place. Although the base case model results show a 61.9% joint probability that NPO BSH stock is not in an overfished condition and that overfishing is not occurring relative to MSY based reference points, the SC18 had noted that the model, while an improvement over past models, did not consider some key uncertainties, in particular natural mortality or stock-recruitment steepness. Stock projections result in SSB decreased below SSB_{MSY} when harvesting at MSY and warned that projections could be overly optimistic if the low recruitments found persist into the future. However, no management advice was provided to limit mortality at a level that will maintain the stock above SSB_{MSY} over the next 10 years. As this species is heavily targeted by various fleets, given the high

[5] Pacoureau N, Carlson JK, Kindsvater HK, et al. Conservation successes and challenges for wide-ranging sharks and rays. Proc Natl Acad Sci U S A. 2023;120(5):e2216891120.

uncertainty of stock assessments especially for the North Pacific, and the absence of reliable reporting of discards, at least precautionary mortality limits should be implemented to prevent overfishing of blue sharks in the near future.

We urge the Scientific Committee to continue to undertake robust stock assessments utilizing all available tools, to increase monitoring and observer coverage, and to establish target and limit reference points for pelagic sharks in the Pacific. Ensemble assessment strategies should be utilized for stock assessments, and Close-Kin Mark-Recapture (CKMR) considered as a potential adjunct tool to include fisheries-independent data for data-poor species. When conventional formal stock assessment data is not available or is uncertain, the WCPFC should nevertheless implement precautionary measures to limit mortality, prevent overfishing and sustain healthy shark populations, as well-enforced management can halt and reverse population declines[5].

dFADs

The lack of reliable catch and stock data further underscores the need for bycatch avoidance and mitigation techniques and generally more selective gear or gear modifications that decrease unobserved and observed bycatch, decrease bycatch mortality, and avoid other negative environmental impacts from gear loss**.** Sharkproject welcomes efforts to develop and implement biodegradable FADs across the WCPFC area. We ask that the WCPFC approve co-funding for the EU-supported biodegradable FAD trial, so that the project can deploy more bioFADs and support exploration of alternative material sources for bioFAD production as soon as possible. WCPFC should require all fleets to remove any encountered dFAD with entangling or lower entangling risk and return them to land for safe destruction. **We urge the Committee to continue requiring FAD closures, further limit the number of dFADs per vessel, and to develop a clear and rapid timeframe for transition to FADs constructed of materials that are fully biodegradable under environmental conditions and generate no ecological risks upon degradation.**

Thank you for your consideration of our comments in favor of protecting sharks and our oceans. It is our responsibility to ensure the survival and recovery of these important predators for the health of the marine ecosystem and future generations. I can be reached at the email below and welcome any opportunity to discuss these comments.

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