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OPENING STATEMENT

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Submitted by the Pew Environment Group

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Pew Environment Group Opening Statement at the 6th Regular Session of The Western Pacific Fisheries Commission

On behalf of the Pew Environment Group, I want to thank the Western Central Pacific Fisheries Commission for inviting us to attend this meeting as an observer and allowing us the opportunity to discuss ways to improve the conservation status of Pacific sharks, and other species under the responsibility of the WCPFC.

As top predators in the ocean, sharks play a critical role in keeping marine ecosystems healthy and the food web in balance. Yet up to 73 million sharks are killed annually for the shark fin market and scientists have shown that many shark populations are threatened with extinction. Most sharks are slow growing, mature late, and produce few young, making them especially vulnerable to overfishing and slow to recover once depleted. Yet there are no limits to the number of sharks taken from the world's oceans.

The WCPFC has taken initial action to conserve Pacific sharks, including Conservation and Management Measure (CMM) 2008-06, which calls on all CCMs to: implement the UN's International Plan of Action for Sharks (IPOA), adhere to a 5% fin-to-carcass weight ratio for sharks, and adopt measures to minimize waste from shark catches and encourage the live release of shark bycatch. The CMM also asks the Scientific Committee to provide preliminary advice on the stock status of key shark species and propose a research plan for the assessment of the status of these stocks in 2010. And finally, a Pacific Islands Regional Plan of Action for Sharks (PI-RPOA) was issued in October 2009. These are all good first steps, but stronger, more meaningful conservation measures are needed now by WCPFC and its member countries to ensure targeted fishing as well as bycatch won't deplete shark species or drive them toward extinction.

As sharks are among the most biologically vulnerable fish in the ocean and little is known about their population status, the Pew Environment Group believes that shark fishing should not occur in the absence of scientific population assessments and precautionary management plans. These measures would help ensure sustainable populations for the future. Furthermore, as sharks are often caught as bycatch, wire leaders should be prohibited and other bycatch minimization measures should be implemented.

At this 6th Session of WCPFC, the Pew Environment Group urges you to take strong action on sharks by adopting a number of key conservation measures that will help protect shark populations in the Pacific Ocean. Specifically, we urge you to support the following measures that will help ensure the conservation of shark populations under WCPFC's management purview:

- Prohibit the use of wire leaders to reduce bycatch and encourage the live release of sharks.
- Include silky sharks among the key shark species identified in CMM 2008-06, and also include other species at high risk of overexploitation, as identified through Ecological Risk Assessments. For example, great, scalloped, and smooth hammerheads, sandbar, porbeagle and dusky sharks should be included with the silky shark immediately as key shark species for the CMM.
- Prohibit the removal of shark fins at sea by requiring that fins be naturally attached on landing. This will help ward against the practice of shark finning and facilitate collection of species-specific catch data.
- Prohibit the retention and landing of exceptionally biologically vulnerable sharks such as the bigeye thresher, as adopted by ICCAT this year.
- Set catch limits and other management measures for vulnerable shark species lacking stock assessments based on Ecological Risk Assessments.
- Make all portions of CMM 2008-06 mandatory.
- Take concrete steps to adhere to the commitments made at the Joint Tuna RFMO meeting in San Sebastian to establish precautionary, science based conservation and management measures for sharks, including: prohibit the retention of particularly vulnerable shark species based on advice from scientists and experts; establish precautionary fishing controls for shark species for which there is no scientific advice; and improve the provision of data on sharks in all fisheries and by all gears.

Thank you.

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