

ICCAT's Finning Ban: Twenty Years On

High Time for Best Practice Enforcement Standards



Background

“Finning” is the wasteful practice of slicing off a shark’s fins and discarding the body at sea. In 2004, ICCAT became the first Regional Fishery Management Organization (RFMO) to ban finning and thus ignited a beneficial trend for the adoption of national and international finning bans around the world.

Unfortunately, ICCAT has not remained a leader in the prevention of shark finning. The ICCAT enforcement standard – a 5% fin-to-carcass weight ratio limit – was based on several Parties’ finning bans at the time, but has since proven complicated, lenient, and otherwise difficult to

enforce. Indeed, twenty years after its passage, ICCAT’s finning ban lags behind those of many other RFMOs, is out of line with most Parties’ positions, and runs counter to expert advice.

Many ICCAT Parties’ domestic finning bans have evolved to prohibit the removal of shark fins at sea (require that sharks be landed with their fins naturally attached) as the only fool-proof means to ensure that finning did not occur. Efforts to strengthen ICCAT’s finning ban with such an amendment began in 2009 and have been annually defeated despite support from the vast majority of Parties.



Benefits

The fins–naturally–attached policy is now widely regarded as the best practice for ensuring finning ban compliance. This method can also facilitate the collection of much needed catch data. Experts have repeatedly documented that under a fins–naturally–attached policy:

- Enforcement burden is greatly reduced
- “High-grading” (mixing bodies and fins from different animals) is impossible, and
- Information on species and quantities of sharks landed is vastly improved

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

Acceptance

Because of its many practical advantages, the fins–naturally–attached method has been mandated by many Central and South American countries, the US, EU, Brazil, UK, Canada, and others.

International fins–naturally–attached requirements have been adopted by other key Atlantic fisheries



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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.



Parties in-favor of fins-attached proposals at ICCAT in recent years



Andy Murch

Monitoring and Enforcement

The complexity and leniency of ICCAT's current fin-to-carcass weight ratio limit makes it exceptionally challenging to determine if ICCAT vessels are finning sharks, especially given seriously

insufficient observer coverage for longline fisheries. Because fins—naturally-attached measures are much easier to enforce than fin-to-carcass ratios, ICCAT adoption of this standard could greatly enhance Parties' ability to implement and ensure compliance with domestic finning bans.

A 2022 Mongabay exclusive¹ detailed shark finning incidents on vessels from Dalian Ocean Fishing (DOF), a People's Republic of China-based tuna firm that includes seven longline vessels operating in the Atlantic Ocean.

According to this comprehensive article, a deckhand who had worked on one of the Atlantic vessels said that roughly 30 sharks were caught per day and 90% of the finned carcasses were discarded. Almost every DOF deckhand interviewed said their boat had transhipped shark fin with other boats in violation of ICCAT rules. Deckhands from three DOF Atlantic longliners recounted fin transfers to vessels outside DOF's fleet.

Deckhands from two of those longliners said they had offloaded fins onto a vessel called the *Lisboa*; a boat flagged to Senegal with the same name has a track record of illegal shark fin transshipments. Another DOF Atlantic longliner recalled offloading fins onto a non-DOF boat on four separate occasions.



¹ Mongabay Series: Illegal Wildlife Trade, Oceans: Shark finning rampant across Chinese tuna firm's fleet, November 1, 2022: <https://news.mongabay.com/2022/11/exclusive-shark-finning-rampant-across-chinese-tuna-firms-fleet/>

CALL TO ACTION

The Shark League commends all the ICCAT Parties that have relentlessly worked over the years to improve ICCAT's finning ban and urges the Commission to finally retake the lead on this fundamental shark safeguard by becoming the first tuna RFMO to adopt the best practice fins–naturally–attached landing requirement *without exceptions*.

Two decades is too long to wait for an enforceable finning ban

Simplify and strengthen the ICCAT shark finning ban

Adopt the best practice **fins-naturally-attached landing requirement without exceptions**

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The Shark League of the Atlantic and Mediterranean was formed with support from the Shark Conservation Fund to advance responsible regional shark and ray conservation policies. Shark Advocates International, Ecology Action Centre, Shark Trust, and PADI AWARE Foundation are the coalition's founding members.

Contacts

Sonja Fordham

sonja@sharkadvocates.org

Ali Hood

ali@sharktrust.org

Shannon Arnold

sarnold@ecologyaction.ca

www.sharkleague.org – info@sharkleague.org

Funding provided by the Animal Welfare Institute and the Big Shark Pledge.



sharkadvocates.org



sharktrust.org



ecologyaction.ca