

International Commission for Conservation of Atlantic Tunas

Position Statement

At the 2023 ICCAT Annual Meeting, Parties have the opportunity to continue leading the world in international management of heavily fished blue sharks while catching up to other Regional Fishery Management Organizations (RFMOs) in the protection of endangered, filter-feeding elasmobranchs and the prevention of finning. Immediate action — based on science and the precautionary approach — is clearly warranted to safeguard these and other exceptionally vulnerable species.

Close Gaps in Protections for Endangered Mobula Rays and Whale Sharks

ICCAT is the only tuna-focused RFMO that has not adopted safeguards for whale sharks (*Rhincodon typus*) and rays of the family Mobulidae (manta and devil rays). The whale shark and all Atlantic mobula rays are classified as Endangered on the IUCN Red List. Fisheries management measures are

essential to fulfilling conservation commitments under various environmental treaties and ultimately rebuilding populations. The inclusion of these species on Appendix I of the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS) mandates strict protection by member governments, including about half of the ICCAT Parties. Last month, Parties to the Protocol Concerning Specially Protected Areas and Wildlife (SPA) in the Wider Caribbean Region agreed to up-list the whale shark and the oceanic (giant) manta ray to Annex II, which brings another obligation for strict protection.

Manta and devil rays are of particular concern. They are thought to produce just a single pup every one to three years and, as a result, are among the most intrinsically vulnerable elasmobranchs. Whereas Atlantic fisheries appear to discard mobula rays more often than they land them, markets for mobula meat and gill plates persist. Careful handling and release techniques are critical for minimizing the mortality of individuals taken as bycatch.



Mobula Ray. © Francesca Reina/Shutterstock

¹ Fordham, S.V., Hood, A.R., Arnold, S.J., Kachelriess, D., and Lawson, J.M. 2023. Bridging the Gaps that Hinder Shark Conservation: An analysis of ICCAT Parties' policies for CITES-listed Atlantic elasmobranchs. The Shark League. London.

A new Shark League gap analysis¹ documents ample reason for concern with respect to fishing pressure on Atlantic mobula rays. ICCAT records reveal both discards and increasing landings while also suggesting significant under-reporting.

Likely due to a regional ICCAT data enhancement project, the vast majority of Atlantic mobulid catches reported to ICCAT are recorded in 2017. Many Contracting and Cooperating Parties reported mobula landings and/or discards in only that year. Significantly higher catches likely occurred in other years but have not been reported due to capacity constraints.

Retention bans and safe release protocols mandated under ICCAT for both mobula rays and whale sharks (as proposed by the United Kingdom and European Union, respectively) are in line with 2009 SCRS shark management advice (for precautionary measures to protect low-data species with high vulnerability and conservation concern) and can:

- bolster existing national and international protections, and
- amplify critical guidance for maximizing survival of these vulnerable and iconic species.

Ensure Blue Shark Sustainability

ICCAT is the RFMO leader in the management of heavily fished blue sharks (*Prionace glauca*). Groundbreaking total allowable catch (TAC) limits are however too high to ensure sustainability over the long-term, according to the new stock assessment.

ICCAT's Standing Committee on Research and Statistics (SCRS) is recommending reductions of blue shark TACs for both regions after determining that the South Atlantic population is being overfished and the current North Atlantic TAC has only a 3% chance of preventing overfishing and maintaining population health over the next decade. Near-term application of the 70% probability standard (warranted for elasmobranchs) results in maximum 2024 blue shark TACs of:

- less than 20,000t for the North Atlantic and
- 25,000t for the South Atlantic.

In addition, ICCAT should:

- immediately allocate the South Atlantic blue shark TAC among Parties to end substantial overages; and
- direct the SCRS to elevate the priority for developing a blue shark harvest control rule.



Blue shark. © Ellen Cuylaerts/OceanImageBank

Recover Shortfin Mako Sharks

SCRS calculations also reveal that fishing mortality of North Atlantic shortfin mako sharks (*Isurus oxyrinchus*) remains excessive. To reverse dangerous declines, ICCAT Parties must:

- extend the retention ban for the exceptionally depleted North Atlantic population;
- expand and prioritize actions toward minimizing bycatch and associated mortality throughout the Atlantic; and
- promote greater compliance with reporting requirements (regarding catches and bycatch mitigation) as well as South Atlantic catch limits and the North Atlantic ban.

Strengthen the Finning Ban

ICCAT's ban on shark finning (the wasteful practice of slicing off a shark's fins and discarding the body at sea) relies on a complicated fin-to-carcass ratio limit that is hard to enforce and exacerbates inadequacies in shark catch information.



Shortfin Mako, Silky Shark. © ICMBio-CEPSUL

Requiring that sharks be landed with their fins naturally attached can:

- ease enforcement,
- eliminate wiggle-room to fin sharks, and
- facilitate collection of species-specific catch data.

It is high time that ICCAT adopted this increasingly accepted best practice for effective finning ban enforcement.

CALL TO ACTION

Unenforceable half measures are not enough to save sharks.

We urge ICCAT Parties to actively support adoption of ICCAT measures to:

- protect endangered whale sharks by prohibiting retention and promoting safe release (in line with proposal PA4 807 from the European Union);
- protect endangered manta and devil rays (*Mobula* spp.) by prohibiting retention and promoting safe release (in line with proposal PA4 808 from the United Kingdom);
- enforce the finning ban and improve species-specific shark catch data by requiring that sharks be landed with fins naturally attached, *without exceptions* (in line with proposal PA4 809, led by the United States);
- ensure long-term sustainability of blue sharks by reducing and allocating North and South Atlantic TACs in line with new SCRS advice and a 70% chance of success (in the near-term); and
- rebuild shortfin mako populations by minimizing incidental mortality and extending the North Atlantic retention ban long-term.

LLAMADA A LA ACCIÓN

Introducir medidas deficientes y no aplicables en la práctica no bastará para salvar a los tiburones.

Instamos a las partes de ICCAT a apoyar activamente la adopción de las medidas recomendadas por ICCAT destinadas a:

- proteger a los tiburones ballena amenazados prohibiendo su retención y fomentando su liberación segura (de conformidad con la propuesta PA4 807 de la Unión Europea);
- proteger a las mantas y mantas diablo (*Mobula* spp.) amenazadas prohibiendo su retención y fomentando su liberación segura (de conformidad con la propuesta PA4 808 del Reino Unido);
- hacer cumplir la prohibición de cercenamiento de aletas y mejorar los datos de capturas de tiburones por especie exigiendo que estos sean desembarcados con las aletas adheridas de forma natural, *sin excepciones* (de conformidad con la propuesta PA4 809, liderada por Estados Unidos);
- garantizar la sostenibilidad a largo plazo de los tiburones azules reduciendo y asignando los totales admisibles de captura (TAC) del Atlántico norte y sur, de acuerdo con la nueva recomendación del Comité Permanente de Investigación y Estadísticas (SCRS) y el 70 % de posibilidades de éxito (inmediatamente, desde el comienzo), y
- recuperar las poblaciones de marrajo dientuso minimizando la mortalidad incidental y ampliando a largo plazo la prohibición de retención de las especies de ICCAT en el Atlántico norte.

APPEL À L'ACTION

Des demi-mesures inapplicables ne suffiront pas pour sauver les requins.

Nous demandons instamment aux Parties à l'ICCAT de soutenir activement l'adoption des mesures de l'ICCAT visant à :

- Protéger les requins-baleines menacés d'extinction en interdisant leur rétention et en encourageant leur remise à l'eau vivants (conformément à la proposition PA4 807 de l'Union européenne) ;
- Protéger les raies manta et les raies diables (*Mobula* spp.) menacées d'extinction en interdisant leur rétention et en encourageant leur remise à l'eau vivantes (conformément à la proposition PA4 808 du Royaume-Uni) ;
- Faire respecter l'interdiction du prélèvement des ailerons et améliorer les données sur les captures de requins par espèce en exigeant que les requins soient débarqués avec leurs ailerons naturellement attachés, *sans exceptions* (conformément à la proposition PA4 809 menée par les États-Unis) ;
- Assurer la durabilité à long terme des requins bleus en réduisant et en allouant des totaux de prises admissibles (TAC) pour l'Atlantique Nord et Sud conformément au nouvel avis du Comité permanent pour la recherche et les statistiques (SCRS) et un taux de réussite de 70 % (immédiatement, dès le début) ; et
- Reconstituer les populations de requins-taupes bleus en minimisant la mortalité accidentelle et en prolongeant à long terme l'interdiction de leur rétention dans l'Atlantique Nord.

نداء لاتخاذ إجراء

كافية إنقاذ القرش! التدابير الملجزة غري القابلة للتنفيذ ليست

ندعو ونحث الأطراف في اللجنة الدولية لحفظ تون المحيط الأطلسي (آيكات) أن تدعم وبشدة اعتماد تدابير اللجنة من أجل:

- وإنفاذ حظر قص الزعانف وتحسين بيانات صيد أسماك القرش الخاصة بالأنواع من خلال المطالبة بإنزال أسماك القرش بالزعانف الملحقة بشكل طبيعي، دون استثناءات. (تماشياً مع المقترح PA4 809، بقيادة الولايات المتحدة).
- ضمان الاستدامة الطويلة الأجل لأسماك القرش الزرقاء من خلال تقليل وتخصيص لجان المساعدة التقنية لشمال وجنوب المحيط الأطلسي بما يتماشى مع المشورة الجديدة بشأن التقييمات الخاصة لأسماك القرش وفرصة النجاح بنسبة 70 في المائة (على الفور، منذ البداية)؛
- إعادة بناء (تكاثر) مجموعات ماكو قصيرة الزعانف عن طريق التقليل إلى أدنى حد من الوفيات العرضية وتمديد حظر الاحتفاظ بشمال الأطلسي على المدى الطويل.
- حماية أسماك قرش الحيتان المهددة بالانقراض عن طريق حظر الاحتفاظ بها وتعزيز إطلاقها الآمن (تماشياً مع المقترح PA4 807 المقدم من الاتحاد الأوروبي).
- حماية سمك المانتا وشيطان البحر المهددة بالانقراض (*Mobula* spp.) عن طريق حظر الاحتفاظ بها وتشجيع الإفراج الآمن عنها (تماشياً مع الاقتراح PA4 808 المقدم من المملكة المتحدة).

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.

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