**Press release**

**Sharkproject: Emergency call from the oceans**

*At the IUCN Congress in Marseille, the shark conservation organization Sharkproject calls for a transformation to an ecosystem-based fishing to preserve the biodiversity of the oceans. In this context the organization calls for urgent measures to save the endangered mako shark population in the Atlantic Ocean and also presents initiatives to curb the global exploitation of threatened shark populations. Establishing a rescue plan for the oceans above all must be the responsibility of the EU. Introducing a Fins Naturally Attached policy as a mandatory standard in all fisheries is needed to protect endangered sharks and rays. Sharkproject also addresses the issue of countless sharks wasted for harvesting of squalene from shark liver oil. The organization proposes biotechnological production methods as an alternative to secure the demand for the lipid for vaccines, cancer therapy, food supplements and in the cosmetics industry.*

Marseille, 04.09.2021 - For the last four years, the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) have been discussing how to stop the overfishing of the IUCN endangered shortfin mako shark and how to start a recovery plan for the overfished stock of this species in the North Atlantic. Since 2017 the Standing Committee on Research and Statistics (SCRS), ICCAT's scientific body, has been recommending to implement an immediate retention ban in the North and define a Total Allowable Catch (TAC) limit of no more than 2001 metric tons for the South. [The stock in the North Atlantic is overfished with 90% probability](https://www.iccat.int/Documents/BienRep/REP_EN_18-19_II-2.pdf) but nevertheless overfishing carries on and without protective measures implemented also for the South a similar trajectory is expected there as now seen in the North.

**Biodiversity crisis in the Atlantic: EU and US continue to stall measures for recovery of shortfin mako shark (Isurus oxyrinchus) at ICCAT**

According to the EU delegation, it should be the prerogative of managers to decide which measures to implement and it exceeds the scientists’ mandate to make such recommendations. Dr. Iris Ziegler, Head of International Cooperation at Sharkproject, comments: "So far, the commercial interests of EU fisheries and the US sport fishing lobby have negated scientists recommendations and prevented all efforts to implement a sustainable management of mako shark populations. The survival of this top predator in the Atlantic is now at stake and we therefore need to act swiftly. If the stock of shortfin mako shark collapses and can’t fulfill its role in the ecosystem any longer, or the species even goes extinct, this will result in a severe biodiversity crisis. If the EU and the U.S. do not act now, then they will be responsible for this crisis."

The 2020 catch data clearly shows that all measures taken so far were not effective to stop overfishing and [with 1261 tons catches by Spain and Portugal actually increased](https://meetings.iccat.int/index.php/s/BsbDknaXlo8EbsK?path=%2FStatistics) by 9% compared with 2019. Moreover, apparently the EU fleet has not released a single animal alive, although the existing ICCAT conservation measure for mako sharks requires to immediately release all animals which are caught alive. "But as long as a profit can be made from dead animals, all animals are of course already dead at the time when the lines are hauled in. However we do know from observers that this is not true," Dr. Ziegler comments the catch data. “The EU's proposal to retain 500 metric tons of mako sharks and a maximum of two specimens per fishing trip clearly demonstrates that there is zero willingness to refrain from this lucrative business. Proof of compliance with such a regulation will be just as impossible to obtain as for the current obligation to release all animals that are still alive.

**Protection of mako sharks: retention bans are effective**

Only a complete retention ban for mako sharks can really be controlled and will therefore incentivize fisheries to release all animals as quickly as possible, thereby increasing the likelihood of their survival. ICCAT and member states have successfully implemented such bans in the past for other shark species, despite significantly lower post-release survival rates of these species in comparison to the more than 70% survival rate that has been demonstrated for mako sharks. Canadian catch data furthermore demonstrates the effectiveness of a retention ban (which the Canadian fleet has implemented since early 2020) by a significant increase in live releases for 2020 compared to 2019 numbers.

For years, mako shark stocks in the Atlantic have been declining, and even if fishing mortality was now to be reduced to zero, it will take at least 50 years for the North Atlantic stock to recover. Yet, the EU and the U.S. continue to insist that a 50% chance for recovery within these 50 years is good enough for mako sharks, [although the U.S. otherwise requires a 70% probability of recovery for pelagic sharks, due to their low reproductive rate](https://s3.amazonaws.com/media.fisheries.noaa.gov/2020-09/Draft%20Amendment%2014_FINAL.pdf?9GS1bbZ5hJ5SCX1MX2SNNsP.aFBOjstl).

This dramatic situation therefore demands urgent action by all governments and delegations at ICCAT. [Together with many other organizations, Sharkproject is calling for an immediate retention ban for mako sharks in the North Atlantic](https://www.sharkproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ICCAT_Statement_for_Panel-4_final_Oct30.pdf). In addition, further scientific research, and the implementation of effective strategies to avoid all mako shark bycatch are needed. Furthermore, the establishment of a comprehensive electronic monitoring system (EMS) is of utmost importance, as well as increasing observer coverage to at least 20% of all fishing trips. Also, in the South Atlantic, action must now be taken by at least introducing a catch limit. In addition, Sharkproject believes new stock assessments for shortfin mako sharks in the North and South Atlantic should be performed by 2024 at the latest to assess the damage caused by the failures of the past. In a joint statement, Sharkproject and IPNLF (International Pole and Line Foundation) have asked ICCAT and all ICCAT delegations after the last unsuccessful meeting in July for their support of shortfin mako shark conservation for the upcoming Commission meeting.

**Demand: Change towards ecosystem-based, holistically sustainable fisheries!**

Although the [report of the World Biodiversity Council in 2019 (IPBES) dramatically illustrates that industrial fishing of the last 50 years has been the major cause for the loss of marine biodiversity](https://ipbes.net/sites/default/files/inline/files/ipbes_global_assessment_report_summary_for_policymakers.pdf), little to nothing has happened so far. Industrial fisheries worldwide are still allowed to catch huge amounts of fish with non-selective fishing methods, resulting in huge amounts of bycatch of endangered species as "waste" and still receive subsidies, e.g. from the EU, to do so. Therefore, Sharkproject requests the EU, and all Regional Fishery Management Organizations (RFMOs), to start transforming fisheries demanding the use of selective fishing gear and an ecosystem-based approach, combined with a fully transparent fishery management. The focus thereby must not be restricted only to those species intended for human consumption, but must consider the entire ecosystem and, above all, the so-called "unwanted" bycatch.

In addition, the expansion of marine protected areas as "No Take Zones" to at least 30% of the ocean surface by 2030 is essential for the recovery of threatened stocks and ecosystems. Sharkproject presents its [position paper on the reform of industrial fisheries](https://www.sharkproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Fishery_Improvements-Position_Statement_SHARKPROJECT_English1.pdf) during the IUCN Congress including improvements in longline fisheries and purse seine fisheries with drifting fish aggregating devices (dFADS), which should be implemented by the end of 2022. Longline fishing is used worldwide to targeted tuna, swordfish, and sharks. Although sharks are often defined as “unwanted” bycatch they are still targeted and marketed nevertheless - also by the EU fleet, being one of the top 10 shark fishing fleets in the world. dFADs are used in purse seine fisheries as so-called fish aggregators to increase the catch efficiency for tuna, but they are also responsible for the massive bycatch of mostly juvenile silky sharks (Carcharhinus falciformis, IUCN vulnerable) and oceanic whitetip sharks (Carcharhinus longimanus, IUCN critically endangered).

**Reform of industrial fisheries must prioritize conservation of biodiversity**

Every year, countless sharks, rays, sea turtles and marine mammals get entangled in the constructions of these drifting rafts and die without these mortality rates even being recorded anywhere. This mortality also continues after fisheries have either lost or intentionally abandoned their dFADs. Those constructions continue drifting in the oceans for many years acting as "ghost nets" and continue killing thousands of threatened animals before eventually beaching and causing further damage thereby. The specific requests for immediate improvements for these two fishing methods, which are to be implemented by end of next year, and all other demands can be found in the [position paper of Sharkproject](https://www.sharkproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Fishery_Improvements-Position_Statement_SHARKPROJECT_English1.pdf).

Alexander Smolinsky, President of Sharkproject International: "Industrial fishing is responsible for the dramatic decline of biodiversity in our oceans. The reason for this is the increasing demand for cheap and even cheaper fish, and the maximization of profits by fisheries through increased efficiency in fishing. However, thereby also the amount of bycatch of endangered species increases as well as the irreversible destruction of vulnerable marine habitats. The oceans and all of us are paying the price for this, as healthy oceans are a “sine qua non” if we are to win the fight against climate change. Therefore, an immediate transformation towards an ecosystem-based, holistic sustainable fishery management is needed. This must consider all impacts of fishing and must ensure that overfished fish stocks, but also threatened populations of sharks, rays, sea turtles, seabirds and marine mammals, the bycatch in this industrial mass fishing, can recover. A ban on particularly destructive fishing methods, such as bottom trawling or deep-sea fishing, a switch to selective fishing gears, full transparency of all fishing activities, and far-reaching improvements in fishery management based on the precautionary principle are the only possible response to this massive threat to our blue planet."

**Protection of sharks and rays: Fins Naturally Attached as a mandatory global standard.**

Although a "Fins Naturally Attached" (FNA) policy, i.e. the landing of all sharks with their fins naturally attached to the body, is globally recognized as the only effective measure to prevent the "finning" of sharks (the cutting of fins at sea and the disposal of the carcasses as waste at sea), this measure is still not obligatory for all fisheries, notes Sharkproject at the IUCN Congress. Not even in places where finning is officially banned. Some smaller fisheries management organizations such as NAFO and GFCM, and many nations such as the UK, Canada and also the EU already do require FNA for all sharks and no longer allows the old regulation of predefined ratios of fins to carcasses being retained on board anymore. However, none of the four major tuna management organizations - ICCAT (Atlantic), IOTC (Indian Ocean), IATTC (Eastern Pacific) and WCPFC (Western and Central Pacific) - have so far implemented a FNA regulation. Several Southeast Asian and Pacific nations still oppose such a policy as too burdensome for their fisheries, despite evidence that "finning" still is prevalent in those fisheries.

The MSC label for sustainable seafood has so far also failed to introduce this global standard as a prerequisite for certification of its fisheries, although it has officially banned "finning" since 2012 and has repeatedly reaffirmed a zero-tolerance position. [But even in certified fisheries, "finning" still occurs due to high profit margins and the absence of a regulation which can be monitored effectively.](https://www.sharkproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/shark-finning-letter-April-5th-2019_final.pdf) "Finning" is not only a particularly cruel violation of animal welfare, but even more importantly, a severe obstacle to marine conservation and protection of biodiversity. If fins are cut at sea the actual number of sharks caught and the various species caught can’t be verified, and therefore essential information for stock assessments and derived conservation measures is missing. In addition, the fins of the most endangered shark and ray species, such as the endangered oceanic whitetip shark (Carcharhinus longimanus) and many critically endangered Rhinobatidae species, achieve the highest prices on the market. These species are therefore particularly threatened from continued overfishing. Sharkproject has been calling for many years for a "Fins Naturally Attached" requirement for all fisheries without exemptions and is calling to all RFMOs as well as the MSC to implement a FNA requirement without exemptions, without further delay.

However, the MSC could now introduce this requirement as a prerequisite for all certified fisheries as part of this year's standard review. ["Most recently, however, in a stakeholder submission in June of this year, we unfortunately had to reject the submitted proposal again as completely inadequate, because those fisheries that specifically hunt sharks should continue to be exempt from an FNA](https://www.msc.org/docs/default-source/default-document-library/stakeholders/consultations/survey/consultation-surveys-2021/consultation-summary-reports-2021/msc-fisheries-standard-review---shark-finning-consultation-summary-report---june-2021.pdf?sfvrsn=891c002_9). This makes absolutely no sense from our point of view and almost 70% of all participating stakeholders share our opinion," says Dr. Ziegler.

**Citizens' initiative for an extension of the EU’s FNA regulation.**

[The UK, on the other hand, has recently announced](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-to-introduce-world-leading-ban-on-shark-fin-trade) to extend its FNA requirement to the import and export of all shark fins. Sharkproject had participated in the review of the current situation as part of a ["Call for Evidence" of the UK Department of Fisheries DEFRA](https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/shark-fin-trade-call-for-evidence/outcome/summary-of-responses-call-for-evidence-on-the-scale-and-impacts-of-the-import-and-export-of-shark-fins) at the end of 2020. The results showed that even in Europe the surveillance of compliance with FNA is insufficient, both at sea and at port, especially for fleets fishing outside of EU waters.

The EU is therefore also called upon to improve its FNA policy. In an EU Citizens’ Initiative, supporters across Europe are also calling for an extension of the FNA policy to the trade - for both sharks and rays. To support the Citizens' Initiative, EU citizens can vote electronically on [the EU site: eci.ec.europa.eu](https://eci.ec.europa.eu/012/public/#/screen/home/allcountries) until 31.01.2022 in support of this. Sharkproject supports the collection of votes for this initiative in Germany and Austria.

**Biotechnological squalene production: An alternative to the exploitation of endangered shark populations?**

Already today, at least 3 million sharks are killed per year globally just for their livers to extract the coveted raw material squalene. Deep-sea sharks such as the Portuguese shark (Centroscymnus coelolepis) or leafscale gulper shark (Centrophorus squamosus) are particularly affected, as they contain up to 80% of the substance in their livers and are therefore processed already at sea to obtain the squalene rich shark liver oil. In the so-called "livering" process, similar to "finning", the rest of the animal is thrown back into the sea as waste - dstroying endangered marine resources. Reliable information about populations is missing for deep-sea sharks in particular and many species are still data deficient, but all of them are particularly vulnerable to overfishing due to their adaptation to the deep-sea environment and are therefore especially threatened by this growing exploitation. This is an ominous development in view of the growing demand for squalene as an adjuvant in vaccines for pandemics and a promising candidate for improved cancer therapy.

A purely biotechnological production of squalene at an industrial scale securing the supply for a growing demand does not yet exist, but is principally possible, because yeasts as biotechnological "factories" can produce this substance with high purity. A research group led by Dr. Regina Leber and Prof. Harald Pichler of ACIB/TU Graz, Austria, wants to establish such manufacturing processes in yeasts as cost-effective, industrial scale manufacturing processes with high yields. They therefore submitted an application to the European Commission under the Horizon EIC-2021 program to fund this interdisciplinary project. The aim of the joint project is actively contributing to marine protection and at the same time safeguarding the availability of squalene for the future, as it is already clear today that the increasing demand for squalene cannot be secured from sharks in the long term.

Prof. Harald Pichler therefore sees the cooperation with Sharkproject as"an opportunity to prepare for the challenges of the future via interdisciplinary research and the cooperation of experts from molecular biology, bioprocess technology and bioinformatics, to ensure that the growing global demand for natural raw materials will no longer result in exploitation of wild animals. We can and must meet the demand for such compounds by biotechnological means without exploiting endangered species - and squalene is a perfect example of this." Dr. Regina Leber emphasizes that "biotechnological production is safer for the patient and the consumer, because biotechnologically produced squalene is free of heavy metals e.g. mercury and other impurities like those found in shark liver oil. We hope the European Commission will recognize these benefits and support the project."

**About Sharkproject**

Sharkproject is a shark conservation organization founded in 2002 to advocate for the more than 500 shark species and the marine ecosystem with a vision of intact shark populations worldwide. Sharkproject engages in conservation efforts worldwide, promotes scientific projects and educates about the importance of sharks and the marine habitat.

All employees work on a voluntary basis. All donations directly benefit shark conservation projects and the related education and information work. In addition to the umbrella organization Sharkproject International, there are currently national organizations in Austria, Germany and Switzerland as well as ambassadors in Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Angola.

Sharkproject International and the country organizations in Germany and Austria are full members of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the world's largest network for environmental and species protection. Furthermore, Sharkproject works closely with many other marine conservation organizations on a national and international level and is a member of the NGO Tuna Forum, Rise Up, One Ocean, Make Stewardship Count and many other international coalitions. For more information, visit [www.sharkproject.org](https://www.sharkproject.org/presse/) and the press section at [https://www.sharkproject.org/presse/.](https://www.sharkproject.org/presse/)

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