

## Position Statement on the Outcome of the 27<sup>th</sup> Session of the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (May 8<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> 2023)

### **IOTC Commission Meeting once again shuttered hopes for sharks, despite the courageous leadership of coastal states**

IOTC has been lagging far behind other RFMOs in making progress on shark conservation although the future of most oceanic shark populations is at severe risk in the Indian Ocean.

No actual stock status is available for most of the oceanic shark populations, such as vulnerable silky sharks, endangered mako sharks, or critically endangered hammerhead sharks, let alone other species that are not even reported or assessed by IOTC at all.

IOTC is the tuna RFMO with the fewest and weakest conservation measures in place to reduce mortality of threatened elasmobranchs and no catch limits exist even for those species that are actively targeted in its area of competence. How can the IOTC claim to sustainably exploit tuna stocks and protect endangered, threatened, and protected (ETP) species caught by IOTC fisheries, when year after year the Commission fails to agree on meaningful conservation measures to that end? No progress has been achieved to date to rebuild overfished yellowfin tuna, to improve reporting of shark catches and discards, protect threatened shark species or increase mandatory observer coverage from merely 5% to more meaningful levels.

This year we had hoped to finally see a major turnaround - at least for sharks - in this apparently never-ending vicious cycle of no data, no certainty, no measures, and no improvements. The coastal states of the Indian Ocean endorsed with a larger majority the proposal submitted by Maldives, which could have made a real change for the protection of sharks and the marine ecosystems, which all fisheries depend on - today and for generations to come.

As highlighted in [our opening statement](#), the new conservation measure would have combined and substantially improved existing measures requiring all fisheries to land all retained sharks with *Fins Naturally Attached*, regardless of whether sharks are targeted by the fishery or a bycatch and regardless of whether retained sharks are landed fresh or frozen. Furthermore, reporting requirements at the species level would have been improved and the Scientific Committee been tasked with developing reference points and proposing catch quota for blue sharks and other sensitive shark species e.g. *Isurus oxyrinchus*, *Sphyrna lewini*, *Carcharhinus falciformis* for which retention is not prohibited at IOTC. A major improvement would also have been the combined ban of wire leaders and shark lines, a gear modification of surface longlines used mostly by CPCs targeting sharks to maximise their catch. However, this also substantially increases mortality for shark species that must not be retained and therefore must be released unharmed such as *Carcharhinus longimanus* or other unwanted bycatch of sharks in the industrial longline fleets such as *Carcharhinus falciformis*. Scientific studies have demonstrated that mortality of those species can be reduced by 40 and 30 percent respectively when both gear modifications are banned ([WCPFC-SC17-2021/EB-WP-01](#)) and the WCPFC therefore adopted the combined ban last year in its area of competence between 20N and 20S to specifically protect those two species, but the measure will also benefit all other unwanted and released shark species.

However, at this year's Commission Meeting on Mauritius, IOTC once more failed to follow the example of other RFMOs, adopt best practices and finally make progress on shark conservation by failing to agree on the Maldivian shark proposal. Another miss among many other misses, including failure to agree on measures for rebuilding of overfished yellowfin and bigeye stocks, a high seas inspection scheme, and the measures on drifting FADs as adopted during this year's special meeting on drifting FADs in February by a qualified majority vote but then afterwards objected against by several CPCs including the EU, who will therefore not be bound to the adopted conservation measures.

**SHARKPROJECT** is deeply concerned about this failure and specifically disappointed to see that failure of adoption of the Maldivian proposal is due to the objection of three far distant fishing fleets, Japan, the EU, and China.

Japan and China refused to adopt the proposal on *Fins Naturally Attached* even in the substantially weakened version 3 that describes the same measures described in [CMM-2019-04](#) and have been accepted by both CPCs there in 2019. Despite claiming to care for shark conservation the EU refused to accept a combined ban of wire leaders and shark lines, insisting that its fleets have the choice to ban only one or the other of the two gear modifications - a measure that has already been in place at WCPFC for some years without showing much effect as only the combined ban resulted in a significant reduction of mortality. We are deeply concerned to see that the EU has blocked significant progress for

sharks and marine conservation by claiming a lack of scientific advice for the proposed measure, when even China had been in favor of adopting this combined ban.

All three CPCs were clearly unwilling to compromise and to listen to the science, which is evident and has been on the table. Gear-related mortality or mortality reduction will most probably not differ between oceans for the same species and [Fins Naturally Attached is undoubtedly the globally acknowledged best practice to prevent Finning](#) from happening. We are therefore disappointed to see the EU and Japan opposed to ban wire leaders and shark lines in protection of oceanic white tip sharks, silky sharks, and other vulnerable species, and Japan and China once again opposed to *Fins Naturally Attached* which would have been a huge potential contribution to ending the cruel and unsustainable practice of shark-finning in the Indian Ocean. On both topics CPCs have been hiding behind what they called “the absence of scientific advice”, although such advice clearly exists for both, *Fins Naturally Attached* and the gear modifications to reduce mortality of vulnerable species, which has been adopted as [CMM 2022-04 at WCPFC](#) last year. Both, Japan and the EU, are also CPCs at WCPFC.

In the end the Maldives withdrew the version 3 of their proposal, although it had been co-sponsored by many other coastal states and the EU, as no consensus was possible even on this substantially weakened version, which had already been falling far behind the initial intent. Instead, the Scientific Committee was tasked to develop specific scientific advice on all controversial topics to inform the discussions during the next Commission Meeting in 2024.

**SHARKPROJECT** supports this decision of the Maldives and calls to the IOTC Commission, the Scientific Committee, and all other relevant governance bodies at IOTC to prepare and support clear scientific advice to improve shark conservation measures for the Commission meeting next year, at which time those measures must be adopted and swiftly implemented, as any further delays to such conservation measures are unacceptable and have been overdue for many years, if not decades.

Furthermore, we also call to the Scientific Committee to develop robust management measures for blue sharks and other targeted shark species in the Indian Ocean, especially for shortfin mako, hammerhead sharks, and silky sharks, advising on the development of reference points for Harvest Strategies and at the very least on precautionary total mortality limits with full allocations of catches in the absence of a stock assessment.

We call to all parties that it is time to finally acknowledge that the absence of scientific advice in one specific RFMO should no longer be allowed to block progress in shark conservation especially when the science clearly exists to support such measures or when there is evidence of the same measures have already been implemented by other RFMOs. The Commission should no longer be accepting such excuses for avoiding progress or for not applying the precautionary principle, when indeed these very same CPCs could have themselves asked the Scientific Committee for dedicated scientific advice for IOTC ahead of this year’s meeting. Apparently, we are facing a similar situation here as in the debate on time closures for drifting FADs, a measure the EU continues to be heavily opposed to, having even objected to a duly adopted conservation measure, thereby not being bound to this conservation measure and the closure when a similar closure already exists in all other tuna RFMOs.

Shark conservation in the Indian Ocean is urgent and must no longer be kept in the waiting line!

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SHARKPROJECT International is  
an international initiative for the conservation of sharks and the marine ecosystems