



## Press Release

# Two steps forward one step back for sharks in the Atlantic?

## Mixed outcome of 28<sup>th</sup> ICCAT Commission Meeting in Cairo

Cairo / Munich / Heusenstamm / Zurich / Geneva, 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2023.

At its 28th regular meeting, the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) agreed on a number of management measures for sharks and agreed to evaluate the development of harvest strategies for blue sharks. Conservation groups Sharkproject, Pro Wildlife and the Gallifrey Foundation have criticized the agreed reductions in catches of blue sharks as insufficient to maintain healthy stocks in the Atlantic, as the European Union refused to reduce catches to levels that would give a better than 50/50 chance of stopping overfishing and preventing overfishing. The European Union is responsible for the lion's share of blue shark catches in both parts of the Atlantic.

"ICCAT has agreed to limit maximum annual catches of blue sharks to 30,000 tonnes in the North Atlantic - a quota that is significantly higher than actual catches since 2019, although there is an almost 50% probability that this stock is already overfished. However, we are very grateful to the United Kingdom for the improvements made due to their tireless efforts to negotiate a lower catch rate. The reduced TAC of 27,711 tonnes for the South Atlantic will stop overfishing of blue sharks in the South and ICCAT will assess options for harvest strategies for both stocks," highlights Dr Iris Ziegler of Sharkproject. Progress was also made on several mobulid ray species and whale sharks, as their retention and commercialization will be banned from 2025 onwards. A recommendation to require 'fins naturally attached' to end the cruel practice of shark finning failed again due to the opposition from Japan. The ICCAT meeting took place from 13 to 20 November in Cairo, Egypt, with many, but not all, member states attending in person due to the conflict in Gaza.

### One step forward and one step back for blue sharks

Blue sharks are rated globally as near threatened by IUCN. In the Mediterranean they are rated as critically endangered and globally they are the most heavily targeted shark species (reported [landings of 189,783 t in 2019, or over seven million blue sharks](#)) with an economic value of USD 411 billion, [exceeding the estimated ex-vessel values of each of the three bluefin tuna species](#). Other than tuna and tuna-like species, blue sharks have been commercially exploited in the Atlantic without any management measures defined to limit fishing mortality, which has resulted in the spawning biomass of both Atlantic stocks of blue sharks almost halving in the last 50 years, as ICCAT has been reporting catches of more than 50,000 tonnes annually, since 2007.

Ahead of this year's meeting Gallifrey Foundation, Pro Wildlife and Sharkproject had called for urgently needed progress for the conservation of sharks in the Atlantic; specifically the adoption of management measures to reduce fishing pressure for blue sharks combined with the development of harvest strategies to ensure a long-term sustainable management of these overexploited stocks. The [2023 stock assessments](#) concluded the stock in the North is potentially already overfished (49.6% probability versus 49.7% that it isn't) while the South Atlantic stock is clearly experiencing overfishing at current catch levels. In addition, the organisations had hoped to see measures for other threatened elasmobranchs, caught as a bycatch in ICCAT fisheries.

A recently commissioned legal opinion highlights the obligations of all States under UNCLOS and UNFSA for the sustainable management of commercially exploited sharks, such as blue sharks and shortfin mako, as a (secondary) target species in tuna RFMOs and reviews the applicable requirements of States under CITES, as blue sharks will become listed on CITES App II on November 25th.

The conservation organisations therefore asked that the SCRS, the scientific committee of ICCAT, be tasked to develop a Management Strategy Evaluation (MSE) framework for both stocks - a long overdue task. Blue sharks are a target species and should be managed accordingly instead of being treated as a bycatch species, for which less stringent requirements apply. In line with scientific advice and current practice for other target species at ICCAT, at the very least, a 60% probability is warranted for the stocks to not be overfished or experience overfishing in the next decade. Therefore, the Total Allowable Catch (TAC) in the North should not increase beyond current catch levels and be set at 25,000 tonnes for the South.

## EU again denies precautionary principle for sharks

*“We very much appreciate that the European Union tabled proposals for the Commission Meeting for both stocks and requested that an MSE framework be developed, BUT setting the TAC at a level that provides barely a 51% probability of achieving the stock objective by 2033 and allows probabilities to drop even below 50% before that, is not in line with a precautionary approach and might be seen by other States as a precedence that the EU does not follow the science”* says Dr Sandra Altherr, biologist at Pro Wildlife. The United Kingdom tabled a proposal in line with the scientific advice for the Northern stock, that would have maintained catches at the current level, following a precautionary approach and providing a high probability for this stock being neither overfished nor experiencing overfishing. This would have been the preferred option - but after lengthy negotiations and debates with the developing coastal countries for an equitable share in the quota allocation, a compromise was finally adopted limiting catches to 30,000 t, allocating more than 24,000 t of this catch to the European Union.

The organisations appreciate that the Scientific Committee of ICCAT has been tasked to evaluate the development of a management framework for both stocks by 2025 as a big step forward in addition to catches being allocated between fishing nations in both the North and South Atlantic to prevent the agreed TACs being exceeded.

*“However, we are alarmed to see that the agreed compromise for the North will have less than a 60% probability of preventing the stock from being overfished by 2029 and that the European Union could not compromise on the science-based approach the United Kingdom had keenly advocated for”* comments Dr. Iris Ziegler, Sharkproject. She also asks, *“why would Spanish fisheries insist on not giving up quotas for ‘paper fish’, if they don’t plan to utilise these quotas in the future, e.g., to compensate for the reductions they have to make in the South Atlantic by increasing catches in the North?”* This had also been criticised by several developing nations, as neither the European Union nor Japan have fished their allocated quota since 2019 and therefore the lower TAC proposed by the United Kingdom could have been secured without any of them having had to commit to actually reducing current catches – *“a chance that will no longer be available when the next stock assessment in 2028 confirms that the stock is in an overfished state”* says Dr Iris Ziegler.

## Giving blue sharks a break in the South Atlantic

After unsustainable catches in the past, in the absence of binding limits, the Commission agreed for the first time on an allocation of the agreed catch limits to stop overfishing of blue sharks in the South Atlantic. A TAC of 27,711 t was adopted that will provide at least a 60% probability to maintain the stock in the green zone, i.e. not being overfished and not subject to overfishing until 2029. This outcome is an important step forward for the conservation of this stock and has been possible after developing countries, namely Brazil and Namibia, agreed to reduce their most recent catches for the sake of the sustainable management of this stock. However, they clearly complained that the reductions they have to achieve are socio-economically difficult, when more than two thirds of the total catch get allocated to industrial fishing nations. The European Union - the biggest harvester of blue sharks in both parts of the Atlantic received an allocation of 17,405 tonnes. Antoinette Vermilye, Co-founder of Gallifrey Foundation agrees, that *“developing countries should have been given priority over industrial nations to maintain their most recent catch levels, providing equitable access to marine resources, especially as this would have been possible without jeopardizing the overall conservation objectives.”*

## Ban of shark finning failed – but good news for whale sharks and manta rays

Once again ICCAT failed to introduce this globally acknowledged best measure to prevent ‘Finning’ and to allow for the prosecution of offenses, by requiring all sharks to be landed with all fins naturally attached to the body of the animal. The proposal was tabled by the United States and co-sponsored by 25 other States. *“We are very disappointed to see this vital conservation measure for sharks once again being opposed – after 15 years of failed attempts – literally because of Japan and China blocking the measure. This is clearly frustrating but shows how one State can prevent progress being made at ICCAT, as all measures must be adopted by consensus”* explains Antoinette Vermilye. *“This often results in a step back - as very apparent in this instance.”*

ICCAT also adopted measures prohibiting the retention and commercialization of mantas, mobulid rays, and whale sharks from 2025 onwards, pending scientific advice in 2024. This additional process step was requested by Japan, although these threatened elasmobranchs without doubt qualify under ICCAT’s existing SCRS advice for *“species of greatest biological vulnerability and conservation concern, for which there exist very few data”*. The new measures will close existing gaps in the protection of these globally overexploited species, whose retention has already been banned in other tuna RFMOs.

The next regular meeting of ICCAT will take place in Cyprus in November 2024.

**For further information please contact**

Dr. Iris Ziegler, Sharkproject  
International Cooperation  
[i.ziegler@sharkproject.org](mailto:i.ziegler@sharkproject.org); What's App +49 174 3795 190

Dr Sandra Altherr, Pro Wildlife  
Head of Science  
[sandra.altherr@prowildlife.de](mailto:sandra.altherr@prowildlife.de); WhatsApp +49 174 217 5054

Antoinette Vermilye  
Co-founder Gallifrey Foundation  
Wheres-the-fish  
[antoinette@gallifrey.foundation](mailto:antoinette@gallifrey.foundation)

## Background Information

- The detailed requests for blue sharks as put forward by several NGO observers at ICCAT can be found here: [the PA4 820 joint statement from Oceana, Pro Wildlife, Shark Guardian and Sharkproject](#)
- The legal opinion commissioned by Sharkproject and Gallifrey Foundation is available in full at: ["Untangling the Net of 'Bycatch' in Commercial Shark Fisheries: The Interplay between International Fisheries Law and CITES"](#) and as an [Executive Summary](#)
- The detailed [Opening Statement to the Plenary of ICCAT 28<sup>th</sup> Regular Meeting of the Commission from Sharkproject International](#)
- [Poseidon, 2022. Blue Shark: economic valuation of the global market for blue shark products and interdependent policy analysis for sustainable management and trade. Report produced for Oceana by Poseidon Aquatic Resources Management Ltd.](#)
- [ICCAT Report of the Standing Committee of Research and Statistics, 26-30 September 2022: Outcomes of the stock assessments for blue shark](#)
  - ⇒ The 2023 stock assessment indicated a 49.7% probability of the **North Atlantic stock** being in the green quadrant of the Kobe plot (i.e. not overfished and not subject to overfishing), while there is a 49.6% probability of the stock being in the yellow quadrant (i.e. overfished but not subject to overfishing). The SCRS advise that *"the Commission reduces the current TAC to catch levels that will maintain the stock in the green quadrant of the Kobe plot with a high probability"*.
  - ⇒ The 2023 assessment showed that the **South Atlantic stock** was not overfished in 2021 but is subject to overfishing, i.e. has a 46.5% probability of being in the orange quadrant of the Kobe plot, while the probabilities of being in the green quadrant and the red quadrant (i.e. overfished and subject to overfishing) are 44.7% and 8.02%, respectively. The SCRS concludes that *"recent catches (2019-2021; 34,983 t mean catch) are [...] not sustainable in the long term [and indicates] that catches of 27,711t (the estimated 2021 MSY) or less will immediately stop overfishing"*.