

PRESS RELEASE

Conservation of shortfin mako extended to the South Atlantic

Fisheries Commission (ICCAT) agrees for the first time ever on catch limits and allocations but fails to agree to complete retention ban

Vale do Lobo / Zürich/ Munich, 22nd November 2022. The conservation NGOs Sharkproject and Pro Wildlife welcome the decision at the ICCAT* 23rd Special Session in Vale do Lobo to set for the first-time catch limits for endangered sharks in the South Atlantic, after decades of overfishing in the absence of management measures. However, both organisations regret that a full retention ban, as originally proposed by the European Union, was blocked by South Africa and Namibia. ICCAT, the *International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas*, is a regional fisheries management organisation (RFMO) that regulates fishing of tunas, swordfish and sharks in the Atlantic.

Last year's success raised hopes to extend conservation also to the South Atlantic

After last year's landmark achievement by ICCAT for shortfin mako in the North Atlantic, for which a retention ban had been agreed, Pro Wildlife and Sharkproject had hoped to see a similarly far-reaching success this year for the South Atlantic. Endangered shortfin mako, a highly migratory species, spans the complete Atlantic and its survival at both sides of the equator thus relies on harmonised and effective management measures, especially as many fishing nations are operating in both parts of the Atlantic. Shortfin mako is a major and often very welcome bycatch in tuna and swordfish fisheries, the latter often also targeting blue sharks but also catching substantial quantities of shortfin makos. Between 2230 and 3250 tonnes have been caught and commercialised annually from the South Atlantic over the last 10 years.

Although scientists and civil society have requested limiting total mortality for the Southern stock to 2001 t at the most since 2017, when the stock was found to be potentially overfished, to date no limits are in place for the South Atlantic to reduce mortality to a sustainable level and stop overfishing.

In 2019, mako sharks were listed in Appendix II of CITES, the *Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora*, which requests exporting nations to prove the sustainability of their catches. In the absence of such "Non-Detriment Findings", the Scientific Review Group (SRG) of the European CITES authorities decided in September 2022 to no longer allow imports and exports of shortfin mako from the South Atlantic.

EU's proposal for ICCAT: A milestone for the conservation of shortfin mako in the South Atlantic

In the wake of this decision, the EU had stepped up and presented a proposal for the ICCAT meeting with milestone conservation measures for Southern shortfin mako, foreseeing a two-year retention ban and the same measures as adopted by ICCAT for the North in 2021. The proposal was co-sponsored by the United Kingdom.

"As the formerly biggest catch nation of shortfin mako in the South Atlantic, responsible for almost half of all landings, we welcome the decision of the European Commission to finally champion conservation measures across the Atlantic and we were inspired to see Brazil, another big catch nation with landings of more than 600t in 2021, supporting the proposal on the floor from the start of the negotiations, as were many other nations" said Dr. Iris Ziegler, fishery expert at Sharkproject International.

She carries on “However, it was very disappointing to see that South Africa and Namibia, two other major catch nations in the South, objected to the proposed retention ban and requested to continue retaining even animals that are still alive at haul back to the boat and even without having an observer on board”. Both are important measures to reduce bycatch mortality and have been agreed for the North last year.

Two catch nations prevent ICCAT from agreeing on a precautionary approach and a retention ban

The two member states to the Commission had threatened to object to the adoption of the proposal during the first Panel session and again literally minutes prior to the adoption of a revised proposal, which the two sponsors had negotiated with all parties over the course of the last week.

“We are disappointed that ICCAT failed to adopt the proposed retention ban in line with a precautionary approach to reduce total mortality after years of overfishing” highlighted Dr. Ralf Sonntag, marine policy advisor for Pro Wildlife and explained “A retention ban is the most effective way to give the population a break and evaluate bycatch mortality from discard data as a substantial proportion of bycaught animals could be released alive.

Both organisations welcome the achieved agreement but are very concerned over the concessions that were made upon request by South Africa and Namibia. “Despite a cap of almost 50% compared to landings in 2021, respectively 1295 tonnes allowed retention for 2023 and 2024, these concessions may incentivise” so Iris Ziegler, “some catch nations to also increase landings above their 2021 catches and kill live animals instead of releasing them. Thereby the objective to limit Total Mortality to 2001 t will probably not be met, especially as non-reporting of discards has been widespread and total mortality has been substantially underestimated in the past.”

Summary of this year’s results

The now adopted proposal requires all catch nations with > 500 t of historic landings to cut landings by 60% while those that had less than 500 t only have to cut back by 40% over historic landings. In addition, most measures adopted for the North Atlantic in 2021 now also apply to the South Atlantic, specifically

- reporting of all dead discards and live releases
- foreseeing science-based retention limits for the future
- having agreed rebuilding objectives for the stock if found to be overfished

Iris Ziegler finishes by adding: “We urge ALL parties to voluntarily refrain from retaining at least those animals that are still alive at haul back and to work on effective measures to avoid short fin mako catch in the first place. It is mandatory to substantially reduce bycatch mortality BOTH for the North and the South Atlantic, if we want to stop using the decline of these stocks.” USA and Canada reported an increase of life releases to 60 – 70% of their discards in 2021.

Background information:

The opening and closing statements made by Sharkproject and Pro Wildlife are available for download at

<https://www.sharkproject.org/media/htyfukm3/opening-statement-for-iccat-plenary-november-2022.pdf> and

https://www.sharkproject.org/media/tqblnsv/pa4_813_eng.pdf

Mako sharks are close relatives of the great white shark. They live mainly in tropical and warm temperate waters. Mature animals reach a size of about 4 m. They reproduce extremely slowly with late maturity and only few live pups every 2-3 years. This makes them highly vulnerable to overfishing and once overfished stocks take 50 years or more to recover even if no fishing occurs. Makos are considered the fastest and most enduring shark and are said to be able to reach speeds of up to 70 km/h when hunting.

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About Pro Wildlife

Pro Wildlife is a non-profit organisation that works internationally to protect wildlife and its habitats with the aim to preserve biodiversity and to save animals. Thus, the survival of species in their habitat, but also the protection of the individual animal is of key importance. Pro Wildlife advocates for better laws and effective protection measures for wildlife, e.g. at CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora), ICCAT (International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas) and the IWC (International Whaling Commission). In various countries, the organisation supports aid projects for animals in need, helps to preserve habitats and works to ensure coexistence between people and wildlife.

About Sharkproject

Sharkproject is a species conservation organization dedicated to the protection of sharks and their marine habitat. In addition to education and outreach on marine conservation issues, Sharkproject is committed to a global transformation of the use of our oceans, towards an ecosystem-based fishery management, the reduction of the bycatch of threatened species, and the creation of marine protected areas. All employees work on a voluntary basis and all donations are used to directly support shark conservation projects. Besides the umbrella organization Sharkproject International, there are country organizations in Austria, Germany and Switzerland. Sharkproject is a member of the Deep Sea Conservation Coalition (DSCC), Seas at Risk, the Transform Bottom Trawling Coalition and advocates for a moratorium against deep sea mining and an end of destructive fishing methods.