

# Uproar Continues Over Alleged Shark- Fin Landing

*(Part Five in a Series)*

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*Suspect ship: Taiwanese vessel at dock and sacks of shark fins  
Courtesy of PRETOMA*

Environmental groups renewed calls this week for an investigation into the Taiwanese boat Ho Tsai Fa No. 18, accused of irregularities in the alleged landing last week of unattached shark fins and other products not listed on its official declaration. But prosecutors have dismissed the complaints as baseless.

According to environmental groups MarViva and the Costa Rican Sea Turtle Restoration Project (PRETOMA), dock workers began unloading unattached frozen shark fins – a violation of regulations established by the Costa Rican Fishing Institute (INCOPECSA) – at approximately 3 a.m. on July 31, just two days after witnesses had tipped off the Coast Guard and the local Prosecutor's office that the ship may have been loaded with the fins (TT, Aug. 1).

However, Prosecutor Wilberth Jiménez told The Tico Times that the fins were the product of a previous authorized landing. He said he based his decision on information from INCOPECSA officials.

However, the two agencies' responses do not explain why the ship, whose official declaration report cites 60,000 kg of whole shark, does not name other species it landed, including marlin and tuna, said a MarViva spokeswoman, citing witnesses.

Also, responses to a Tico Times inquiry do not explain why workers continued to unload the ship's freight at such an unusual hour. A complaint filed last week by PRETOMA with the Finance Ministry's Office of Customs and citing Article 213 of the Fiscal Code states that any cargo unloaded on private docks or during unusual hours should be considered contraband.

PRETOMA on Wednesday filed yet another complaint with the Finance Ministry, this time against the Ho Tsai Fa. Both the Ho Tsai Fa and the Goida U Ruey – a foreign vessel suspected of unloading 30 tons of unattached shark fins on May 31 – are

represented by the same private customs agent, Aduamar, S.A. (TT, June 13, July 11, 18, 25). Both ships' declarations show they sailed from the same port, Charco Azul, Panama.

The complaint asks authorities to prevent the ship from leaving port until an investigation is conducted by fiscal authorities and Finance Ministry officials.

Asked by a Tico Times reporter this week if he will order an investigation into anomalies that continue to plague the fishing industry in the coastal port of Puntarenas, President Abel Pacheco said only that he hoped legislators will quickly pass a fishing bill currently before the Assembly, which would criminalize the practice of landing unattached fins (see separate story).

The President did not discuss the possibility existence of large-scale tax evasion by shark fin importers and exporters, or the possible national security risk of unmonitored cargo landings by foreign vessels on private docks in the middle of the night. Sitting by the President's side, Security Minister Rogelio Ramos did not comment.

Last week, the Ho Tsai Fa began unloading its cargo on July 29 at 5 p.m. on the private dock Permata, less than one kilometer from INCOPECSA's Puntarenas office. Witnesses began filming the boat's crew as they unloaded tuna and marlin, according to statements from both MarViva and PRETOMA.

Suspecting the boat was hauling unauthorized cargo, witnesses notified the Prosecutor's office. Two INCOPECSA inspectors, their supervisor, Ana Salas, and Coast Guard officials arrived shortly after.

"The film did not show any evidence that the fins were landed from that ship," Prosecutor Jiménez, who needs a judge's search warrant to inspect private docks, repeated this week. The prosecutor added that INCOPECSA officials, who had arrived to supervise the unloading, found nothing unusual.

But Jiménez could not explain how three INCOPECSA officials could overlook the discrepancy between the ship's declaration report and the products it was unloading, nor why the ship would wait nearly two days to finish unloading its cargo. "You would have to ask INCOPECSA," he said.

"What do we have to do to get these ships investigated?" demanded PRETOMA President Randall Arauz. "We've filed complaints and now we have to collect all the evidence too?"

The Tico Times obtained a copy of a second video Arauz and MarViva spokeswoman Marcela Vargas say was filmed at 5:30 a.m. on July 31, which shows dockworkers breaking apart frozen fins and loading them into 50-kg sacks. While the portion of the video in The Tico Times' possession does not show the fins being unloaded from the Ho Tsai Fa, sacks of fins are visible next to the boat.

“Where else would they have come from, and why would workers go through the trouble of freezing them, then hauling them back out to the dock to break them up and re-sack them – at 3 in the morning?” he asked.

A report this week in the daily La Nación, quoting INCOPELCA’s chief of inspectors in Puntarenas, Ana Salas, stated that only 20% of boats officially reported as landing shark are actually inspected by one of INCOPELCA’s two local inspectors. However, Salas’ comment contradicts a March 3 letter given to The Tico Times, signed by INCOPELCA President Ligia Castro and addressed to Arauz, Pacheco, Environment Minister Carlos Manuel Rodríguez and other government officials, in which Castro stated that “The random system that INCOPELCA uses (to inspect boat landings) consists of the inspection of a great majority of the boats, especially when inspection requests indicate shark volumes greater than 20 tons.”

“If INCOPELCA can’t control this, they should just shut down (the landing of shark fins) until they are capable,” said Arauz.

According to Ministry of Agriculture export data, nearly all reported shark fin exports are in the form of dry-powder processed fins. The data, provided to The Tico Times by Pretoma, show that fins landed in Puntarenas at an estimated cost of \$65/kg are processed in the San José metropolitan area in one of at least three private processing plants. With significantly less weight and occupying less space, the fins are exported at roughly the same price, showing that a considerable profit is made locally during processing, according to Pretoma.

A Tico Times reader last week discovered an advertisement for a local restaurant, the Villa Bonita, offering shark fin soup (see “Letters”). Blaming the menu item on an incorrect translation, the restaurant’s owners – who said they do not serve shark fin soup – promptly corrected the ad.

President Pacheco, who is scheduled for an official visit to the Republic of Taiwan later this month, called the practice of finning sharks “shameful,” and said he would inquire during his trip if any Taiwanese companies are involved in practices of “pirating.” Pacheco met yesterday with Taiwanese Ambassador Steven Wang and his Director of Trade, but the results of that meeting were not known at press time.

A spokeswoman for the Taiwanese Embassy did not respond to a Tico Times interview request by press time.