

**Where are the Fins?  
Agencies Pass Buck**  
*(Second in a Series)*

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When Costa Rican Coast Guard official Manuel Silva reported the May 31 landing of three truckloads of unattached shark fins to Costa Rica's Fishing Institute (INCOPECA), it was not the first time he had complained to the agency. He had done so on at least two other occasions, he claims. But his reports went unanswered, and this week, of five government agencies charged with regulating the local fishing industry, none is accepting responsibility.

A foreign fishing vessel flying a Panamanian flag of convenience, the Goida U Ruy No. 1, was spotted at late hours on a Saturday night unloading shark fins without the carcasses, as required by Costa Rican fishing regulations, onto a private dock. Since the landing was denounced last month, the case has drawn attention to the unauthorized use of private docks by foreign fishing fleets, as well as questionable cargo that passes undetected by government inspectors whose job it is to regulate the industry (TT, June 13, July 11).

Silva reported the May 31 irregularity the following day to Ana Salas, an employee at INCOPECA's Department of Registry Protection. Salas told The Tico Times that she notified INCOPECA President Ligia Castro three days later.

However, in a carefully-worded June 11 fax to The Tico Times, Castro stated that, "As of today, we have received no formal complaint from environmental organizations regarding anomalies they have denounced in the press."

The statement did not mention the Goida U Ruy case, nor did it admit that the Coast Guard had in fact filed a complaint, as it had on three other occasions involving the landing of unattached shark fins on private docks by foreign vessels, according to Silva. "It is not INCOPECA that authorizes ships to dock," the statement read.

Caldera Port Authority Captain Marvin Jaén responded this week by reiterating, "A ship's cargo is not our responsibility." He did, however, admit that Costa Rica's current system to regulate the industry "doesn't work."

The reality of that system's shortcomings includes the ability of a private ship to land three tons of cargo without it being inspected. For example, no customs agent was present to inspect the Goida U Rey's cargo, and a declaration regarding the ship's inspection does not include a signature by a customs agent.

Taxes paid by the ship were based on details contained in the declaration, which claimed 50,000 kg of whole shark, 1,500 kg of frozen marlin and 1,000 kg of tuna had been landed. According to documents obtained from the Customs office in Caldera and from Captain Jaén, these details, as is the norm when customs agents do not inspect fishing vessels' cargo, were provided by the private agency Aduamar, which is contracted by the company that owns the ship – in this case, Panamanian-based Goidau Ruy Industrial, S.A.

The Tico Times attempted to contact representatives of the company Goidau Ruey Industrial, S.A., but the company's phone number is not registered in Panama nor in Costa Rica.

At press time, Aduamar owner Roberto Rodríguez had not returned various phone messages left by The Tico Times at his Puntarenas office.

According to Carlos Vargas, sub-director of the customs office in Caldera, inspection of foreign fishing vessels' cargo by customs officials depends on a random computerized system similar to the system of green and red lights implemented in some airports.

"We don't have sufficient personnel to visit every ship," he said. According to Vargas, his office has only one inspector.

"The Ministry of Agriculture and INCOPECSA are the ones that must give the green light regarding cargo. If there's a problem, it's with them," he said.

How the random system operates remains a mystery.

"It depends on different variables of our data system," said Gerardo Leiva, of the Customs Directorate's Office of Norms and Procedures. "It's an internal factor that cannot publicly be divulged."

According to Mario Ulate, of the Office of Customs Department of Verifications, a 15% tax should have been collected on the fins. The export price of shark fins varies with each company, ranging from \$1.50/kg to \$100/kg. The price paid to fishermen on the dock in Costa Rica is \$70/kg for fins over six inches and between \$10-15/kg for smaller fins.

Some Asian markets pay as much as \$200/kg for the "exotic" product. Clients in gourmet restaurants pay as much as \$60 a bowl for shark fin soup.

Based on these prices, the Goida U Ruey in one landing may have avoided paying an estimated \$315,000 in taxes on the fins – enough revenue to hire 30 new inspectors for one year.

The Goida U Ruey is most likely not an isolated case. Yet no officials consulted by The Tico Times could say with accuracy how many foreign fishing vessels unload uninspected cargo each week – nor, for that matter, how many private docks in Puntarenas are used to unload.

Asked about the possibility of tax evasion, Leiva admitted, "That would be a problem." Yet no investigation had been launched by the Finance Ministry.

Seven weeks after the irregularity, the fate of three truckloads of fins – whose value is estimated at \$2.1 million – remains a mystery.

"We give our word that the (shark fins) existed," a frustrated Silva told The Tico Times.

"This happens frequently, and we never know when a ship is coming or leaving," he said.

Yet, Silva said, at least three of his complaints to INCOPECSA have gone unanswered.

"It's like a state secret – no one knows anything," he said.

*(Next Week: A Close Look at Shark-Fin Trade)*