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The United Nations Bares its Teeth to Protect Sharks

http://www.hsus.org/press_and_publications/press_releases/united_nations_protect_sharks_finining_costa_rica_12-19-07.html

Humane Society International and other conservationists applaud the U.N. General Assembly for its decision to enhance the conservation of sharks throughout the world.

The General Assembly directly addressed one of the greatest threats to sharks—shark "finning." The decision, endorsed this week by the plenary, comes only a month after the world's shark experts identified 30 additional shark species as threatened with extinction. Throughout the world, tens of millions of sharks are caught in nets and on lines every year. Their fins are hacked off and the remainder of the shark is thrown back into the water to die a slow and painful death.

For the first time, the General Assembly recommends that countries consider a policy that is aimed at reducing shark finning by requiring shark fishing operations to retain the whole shark, not just their fins. The recommendation is included in the U.N.'s annual Sustainable Fisheries Resolution.

The policy is based on the economics of shark fishing. Shark meat has such low value that it is not worth the freezer space that it takes up. Fins, on the other hand, which can fetch up to \$700 (USD) per kilogram (equivalent to 2.2 pounds), can be dried on deck and do not require freezing. Therefore, conservationists believe this move will significantly reduce the number of sharks killed.

The government of Costa Rica, which spearheaded the "fins-attached" initiative, is one of a handful of countries that already prohibits the removal of fins at sea.

"Costa Rica has done a fine job of persuading the assembly of the urgent need for shark finning to stop," said Patricia Forkan, president of Humane Society International, which has been campaigning for an end to the practice of on-board removal of fins. "This is a global response to a global problem and we heartily congratulate members of the General Assembly for their ability to see beyond their own domestic agendas."

Conservationists have become increasingly concerned about the effect that the removal of sharks will have on marine ecosystems. As "apex predators," sharks play an important role in maintaining ecosystem balance. The continued removal of large numbers of sharks already appears to be affecting other marine species.

"We're hopeful that this initiative, combined with strong measures proposed by the United States, will provide a far greater level of protection for sharks than we have so far seen from international decision-makers," said Randall Arauz, Costa Rican coordinator of the Shark Coalition, a network of nine organizations from eight countries in Latin America that have worked intensively to end shark finning.

Facts:

Recent additions to the list of shark species threatened with extinction bring the total to 140. Of these, 32 species are "critically endangered," 33 are "endangered" and 75 are "vulnerable". A further 96 species face some level of threat and there are approximately 170 species of shark or ray for which there are insufficient data to make an assessment.

Recent studies in the Northwest Atlantic have shown steep declines in shark populations, particularly among highly migratory species. Since 1986, hammerheads have declined by 89 percent, thresher sharks by 80 percent, white sharks by 79 percent and tiger sharks by 65 percent. All recorded shark species in the region, with one exception, have declined by more than 50 percent in the past 8 to 15 years. It is highly likely that similar results will be seen across the world's oceans.

Recent research indicates that the removal of sharks from their ecosystems could have devastating and unpredictable consequences for ocean ecosystems and for fisheries. In one case, a 100-year old scallop

fishery in the Northwest Atlantic recently had to close down, because the removal of large shark species allowed smaller sharks and rays to proliferate, and to consume the scallops.

Reported global trade in shark fins increased from 3,011 metric tons in 1980 to 11,732 metric tons in 2000. Much of the trade is unreported because many fins do not pass through normal landing channels and because most of the fin trade is conducted in cash to avoid tax and duties.

Research in Hong Kong found that dried fins sold for as much as \$744 (USD) per kilogram in 2002. In 2003 dried shark fins in China retailed for \$200 – 300 (USD) per kg. In "producer" countries such as Costa Rica and Colombia, fishers make \$12 – 17 (USD) per kg for their fins.

Shark fin soup can cost up to \$150 (USD) per serving in Hong Kong, but there are worrying signs of a new market opening up for lower-quality fins, allowing millions more people to buy products such as shark fin sushi, shark fin cookies, shark fin cat food and canned shark fin soup.

Shark fin consists of collagen fiber and has no taste. Flavor is added to the soup by the addition of chicken or fish stock.

Unlike other fish, sharks take many years to mature, they have long gestation periods and they give birth to live young – or they lay eggs – in very small numbers. In some cases of severe overfishing, recovery of the stock, if possible at all, will take decades. The "boom and bust" pattern of shark fisheries has been repeated all over the world wherever sharks have been targeted.