

Shark Fin Trade

Negligence undermines marine conservation.

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During the last months, the interest of the current government, through the Ministry of the Environment (MINAE), to promote national and regional marine conservation has become evident. The protection of Cocos Island National Park, a World Heritage Site, from illegal fisheries and piracy has been effectively strengthened, and only a month ago, a decree was signed that declared the interest of the authorities to protect up to 25% of the nation's Exclusive Economic Zone under some sort of conservation and management regime. Our nation has also been active internationally, and recently signed a Convention with Colombia, Ecuador and Panama, to protect our shared marine resources and promote their responsible and sustainable exploitation. Furthermore, at the United Nations, Costa Rica is leading a process to prohibit certain destructive industrial fishing practices in international waters. Obviously, it will be a long process, as it will be necessary to promulgate new domestic laws and regulations, as well as to reach agreements among diverse nations on the sustainable and responsible use of marine resources at the high seas.

Unfortunately, faced with the overfishing and illegal landing of shark fins by international flag vessels at the ports of our nation, the negligent actions of INCOPECA, the official entity that regulates fisheries, as well as Customs, which must regulate international commerce, threatens to undermine these efforts, and tarnishes our international image and credibility.

Up to November of 2003, it was forbidden to land shark fins in our country, a visionary regulation that deserved international recognition. Nonetheless, under pressure from the press that was widely reporting on violations of this rule, INCOPECA decided that, instead of complying with the regulation, it was better to substitute it with a new regulation that implies a complicated system of crossed controls, in such a way that now landing shark fins is allowed. This change was made possible thanks to a poorly executed study which, according to over 60 biologists of the nation's most prestigious academic institutions, does not follow the formal protocol of serious research and ignores the best scientific evidence available. The study can only be considered subjective, and any management based on it, capricious.

On the other hand, the National Customs Law quite clearly mandates that the landing of fishery products that come from international waters must occur in public docks, or, in private docks that have been duly authorized. However, every month, dozens of international flag vessels land at the private docks of Puntarenas, outside of any existing legal framework. Instead of simply complying with their own law, Customs does as

INCOPESCA, and promulgates complicated systems of crossed controls. Even if these controls had any efficiency whatsoever, Customs has decided to ignore the true nature of the issue: the landing of fishery products at docks that have not been authorized, is illegal.

Its about time for President Pacheco to make a decision. It isn't possible to cast an international conservationist image, and at the same time promote the illegal landing of shark fins by international fleets. The decision is quite an easy one: either abide by our current existing legislation and direct fishing policy based on the best scientific evidence available, or accept, with indifference, our nation's participation and blame in the current overfishing and eventual extinction of the endangered marine species of the Eastern Pacific.