SHARKS win at CITES but what now?

Bangkok, March 2013: 178 member states agreed to add five species of shark – the porbeagle, the oceanic whitetip, and the scalloped, smooth and great hammerhead to Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES).

CITES is the key international agreement for prohibiting or regulating trade in endangered species. As the largest threat to sharks is from the international trade in fins (for shark fin soup), shark advocates have long considered it a key venue to afford shark protection. While sharks have been a subject at CITES since 1994, CITES has been criticized for not doing enough to protect marine species until now.

Why conserve these sharks?

Today, 100 million sharks are killed each year, primarily for their high-value fins for shark fin soup, and often in a practice known as shark-finning which involves cutting the fins off a live shark and throwing them back into the sea still alive, so that more of the high value fins can be collected and taken to the port. Of the 450 species of sharks, one third of this number are endangered - CITES-listed sharks are among the most threatened.

The oceanic whitetips is one species most threatened by extinction. Its population has declined between 80-85% in the Northwest Atlantic and Central Pacific Ocean; while in the Gulf of Mexico, it has declined 99% within four generations. The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) lists it as critically endangered in the northwest and central Atlantic, and vulnerable worldwide. The oceanic whitetip is particularly at risk of extinction because of its low population growth rates, late maturity, longer reproductive cycle, and shorter lifespan.

Hammerhead sharks have also suffered drastic declines. Scalloped hammerheads have declined in the Northwest Atlantic Ocean by 90% from the mid-1970s. Approximately 2.7 million smooth and scalloped hammerheads are taken for the shark fin trade each year. Several factors contribute to the decline: their fins are among the most valuable on the market, they school together in large numbers making them an easy target, they have low population growth rates, and pregnant females, juveniles, and nurseries have been targeted in various locations for their fins. The IUCN lists the scalloped and great hammerhead as endangered, and the smooth hammerhead as vulnerable.

Porbeagle sharks have suffered marked declines over the last 60-70 years. In the North Atlantic, they have suffered a 90% decline and despite recent management plans, risk total collapse at current exploitation rates because of high sea fisheries. Unlike most shark species, porbeagles are specifically targeted for international trade in their meat by western markets, as well for their fins in eastern ones, both of which are of high value. Porbeagles are slow to recover as they are slow growing, late maturing, bear small numbers of young (about four pups a year), and mature females have been overexploited. The IUCN considers the porbeagle vulnerable.

What does CITES require for these sharks?

Species threatened with extinction are listed on Appendix I, which prohibits almost all trade in those species. But, the five shark species were added to Appendix II, which lists species that need regulation of international trade to avoid further threats to their survival.

Under CITES, sharks or shark parts listed on Appendix II can only be internationally traded if they have an export permit. The CITES permit system is intended to ensure the sustainable management and use, and the long-term sustainability of the species. Shark fishers or traders seeking to export sharks, or their fins, meat, teeth, jaws, or leather, need their government's CITES management authority to issue an export permit in advance.

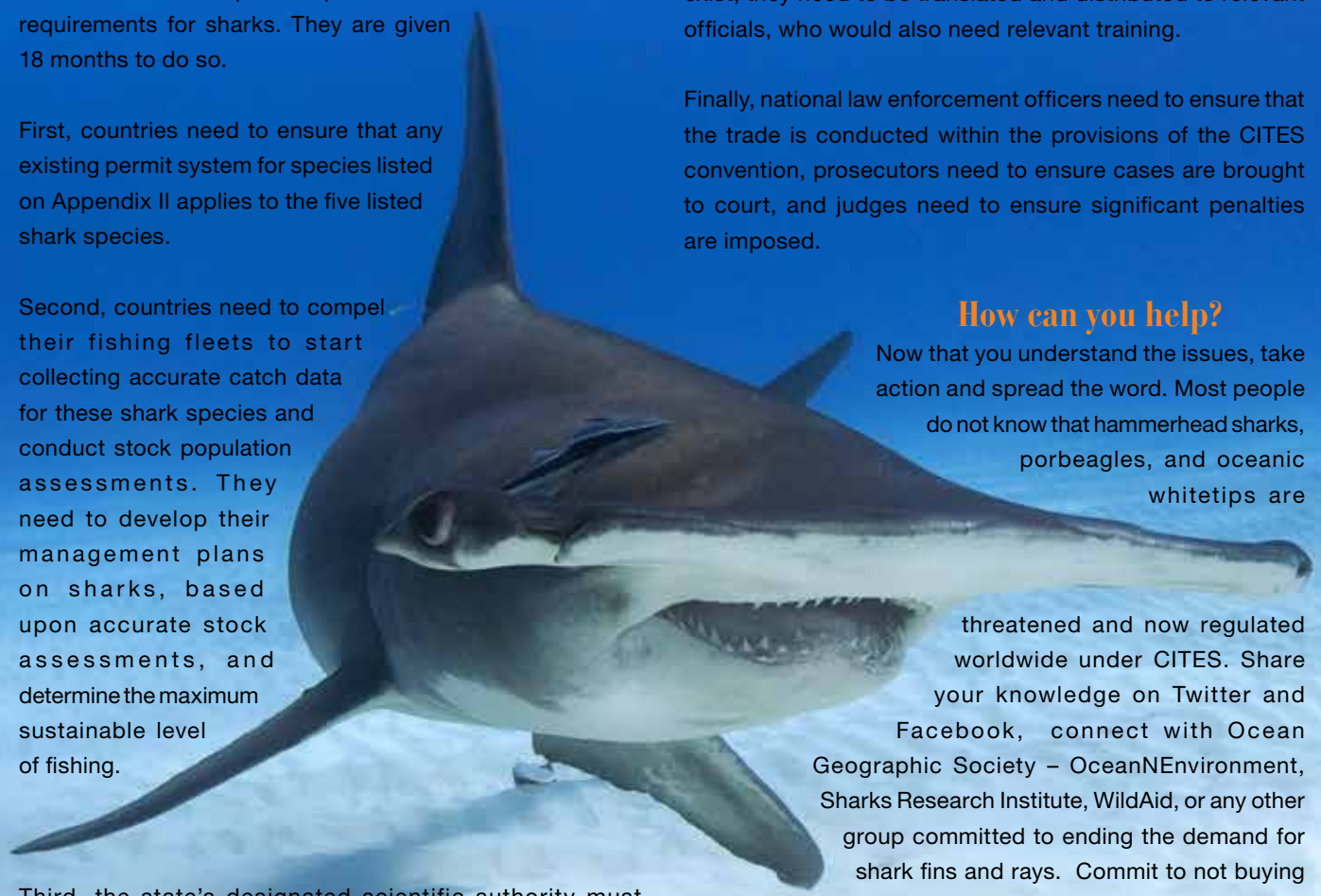
Hammerheads tend to range more close to the coast, but the oceanic whitetip and the porbeagle are commonly found and fished in open ocean. Fishing fleets seeking to catch listed sharks in international waters beyond any national boundary, will need to comply with additional rules relating to the fishing of these sharks, and their "introduction from the sea".

What must countries do to implement the new shark listings?

Member countries of CITES should already have a legal and institutional framework in place that involves giving permits for listed species. Each country needs to take all seven steps to implement the requirements for sharks. They are given 18 months to do so.

First, countries need to ensure that any existing permit system for species listed on Appendix II applies to the five listed shark species.

Second, countries need to compel their fishing fleets to start collecting accurate catch data for these shark species and conduct stock population assessments. They need to develop their management plans on sharks, based upon accurate stock assessments, and determine the maximum sustainable level of fishing.



Third, the state's designated scientific authority must determine if the relevant shark species can be sustainably fished. Referred to as a "non-detriment finding", the scientific authority must determine whether the proposed export of shark or shark parts will be detrimental to the survival of that species, and whether it affects its ability to continue to play its role in the ocean ecosystem throughout its range. This requires a scientific authority to understand shark stock assessments, and to rely on a shark management plan that defines sustainable harvest levels.

Fourth, once a non-detriment finding is done, the country's CITES management authority must determine the specimen was obtained legally in accordance with relevant protection laws, before issuing a permit.

Fifth, the scientific authority needs to play an on-going role in monitoring to ensure the shark species remains at sustainable levels, and would not become eligible for Appendix I.

Sixth, guides for identifying the shark species and distinguishing it from others need to be produced, and then relevant officials trained in the relevant aspects.

Seventh, while guides for identifying the five shark species exist, they need to be translated and distributed to relevant officials, who would also need relevant training.

Finally, national law enforcement officers need to ensure that the trade is conducted within the provisions of the CITES convention, prosecutors need to ensure cases are brought to court, and judges need to ensure significant penalties are imposed.

How can you help?

Now that you understand the issues, take action and spread the word. Most people do not know that hammerhead sharks, porbeagles, and oceanic whitetips are threatened and now regulated worldwide under CITES. Share your knowledge on Twitter and Facebook, connect with Ocean Geographic Society – OceanNEnvironment, Sharks Research Institute, WildAid, or any other group committed to ending the demand for shark fins and rays. Commit to not buying shark products. You can play a role by letting your government know you care about sharks, and want them to fulfill their CITES obligations.

The continuing trade in fins, the lack of shark data and the lack of sustainable management plans, suggest that even with CITES protection, the battle to rescue these shark species has a long way to go. So act, get involved, spread the word, and ensure that your country does its part to ensure the long-term sustainability of these sharks.

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