

COSTA RICA SETS THE EXAMPLE FOR A RESPONSIBLE TREND

Costa Rica, with encouragement from local conservationists, was one of the first countries to ban shark finning and has led the way in implementing the “fins attached” strategy. To overcome both the storage and safety issues, Costa Rican fishermen developed a method for partially cutting a shark’s fins (about 3/4 of the way through), laying them flat along the carcass and tying everything together. This technique allows the fishermen to process and freeze sharks on-board without cutting the fins off. Once at port, the fin is unfolded and cut wholly off of the body.



Blue sharks landed whole. Fresh market in Vigo, Spain. 2006.

Increasingly, other countries are following this responsible trend. Latin American countries that have enacted a fins attached policy include Panama (for industrial fisheries), El Salvador, Colombia and most recently Chile. The same strategy is in place in parts of Australia, Oman, South Africa (for sharks taken in South African waters), the United States and now Tokelau (a territory of New Zealand). Taiwan’s national fisheries agency has also announced plans to implement a “fins attached” policy beginning in 2012.



Landing frozen sharks from a Costa Rican freezer longliner. Fins partially cut but still attached and tied on the body. April 25, 2007, Dock Coopeimpesa, Puntarenas, Costa Rica. PHOTOS: © WWW.PRETOMA.ORG

FINS ATTACHED CAN WORK IN ICCAT

Some ICCAT fleets, such as Spanish and Portuguese freezer longliners, catch sharks in the same manner as the Costa Rican freezer longliners. The Costa Rican freezer vessel example demonstrates how to remedy the issues raised by fishermen from some ICCAT parties. It shows us how sharks can be frozen with their fins attached while still being stored in a safe and efficient manner, without having to previously remove the fins on-board.

The time has come to transform ICCAT’s finning ban by replacing the ratio with the requirement to land sharks with their fins still naturally attached, thus improving the management of sharks caught in ICCAT fisheries.

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TRANSFORMING SHARK FINNING BANS

TOWARDS A REAL AND EFFECTIVE FINNING BAN IN ICCAT

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Shark fins landed from a longliner. Harbour of Las Palmas, Canary islands, Spain. 2008.

OCEANA / LX

Sharks are caught in conjunction with many fisheries managed by the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT), either as by-catch or targeted by surface longline fleets which harvest sharks for their valuable fins. The fins, used in shark fin soup, generally fetch much higher prices than the meat. This discrepancy creates an economic incentive to keep only a shark’s fins and discard the rest of the carcass at sea. This wasteful practice, called “shark finning”, is prohibited for ICCAT parties but through ineffective measures.



ICCAT FINNING BAN AND ITS LOOPHOLES

ICCAT Contracting parties established the first international shark finning prohibition in 2004.¹ It requires full utilization of sharks, noting that fins should total no more than 5% of the weight of the sharks onboard. It does not prohibit fishermen from cutting the fins off sharks while at sea.

This “fin to carcass ratio” is intended to prevent finning by ensuring that the amount of fins landed is proportional to the amount of bodies landed, and that no sharks were thrown back to sea. However, there are numerous problems with the existing ICCAT regulation.

- 1) The ratio in the ICCAT ban does not differentiate between “whole” (live) or “dressed” (gutted and beheaded) weights. Applying the 5% ratio to a whole shark means that more fins could be landed than when applying the ratio to a dressed shark.
- 2) How the fin is removed may affect the fin to body weight ratio. Individual nations or fleets may use different cutting techniques that affect the fin to carcass ratio.
- 3) Currently, the ICCAT finning ban allows fishermen to land shark fins and carcasses separately in different ports. This makes it impossible to verify if fins and carcasses are being landed in the appropriate ratio.
- 4) Different species of sharks have considerably different ratios of fin to carcass size², and therefore a ratio of 5% should not apply to all species.
- 5) The existing regulation creates the possibility that fishers may not only engage undetected in shark finning, but may do so in a way that is even more wasteful: high-grading (mixing carcasses and fins from sharks of different species or sizes).

RECOMMENDATION FOR ICCAT

Oceana recommends that ICCAT Contracting parties replace the ratio with a requirement that sharks be landed with their fins still wholly or partially attached in a natural manner. This straightforward technique has been tested and used in various fisheries around the world, and nations are increasingly adopting “fins attached” requirements. This policy directly benefits fishing nations by reducing enforcement burden and increasing economic value of the fins (more precise fin cutting can be achieved on land).³ In addition, it results in improved data collection since species identification is greatly facilitated with sharks’ fins still attached.

MOMENTUM BUILDS FOR “FINS ATTACHED”

Most shark scientists and conservationists agree that landing sharks with their fins wholly or partially attached in a natural manner is the most straightforward, reliable and effective approach to implementing a finning ban. Calls for a “fins attached” policy have been gaining momentum in the past years:

2006

An ICCAT SCRS paper on fin ratios stated that “the only guaranteed method to avoid shark finning is to land sharks with all fins attached.”⁴

2007

The United Nations General Assembly specifically encouraged consideration of the fins-attached technique.⁵

Separately, leading shark scientists and experts examined finning ban ratios and concluded that:⁶

- Fin to carcass ratios are complicated and usually inadequate and need standardization.
- Differences in cutting techniques and variability in fin sizes and values can lead to finning.
- Ratios set at the high end of scientific advice exacerbate these problems.

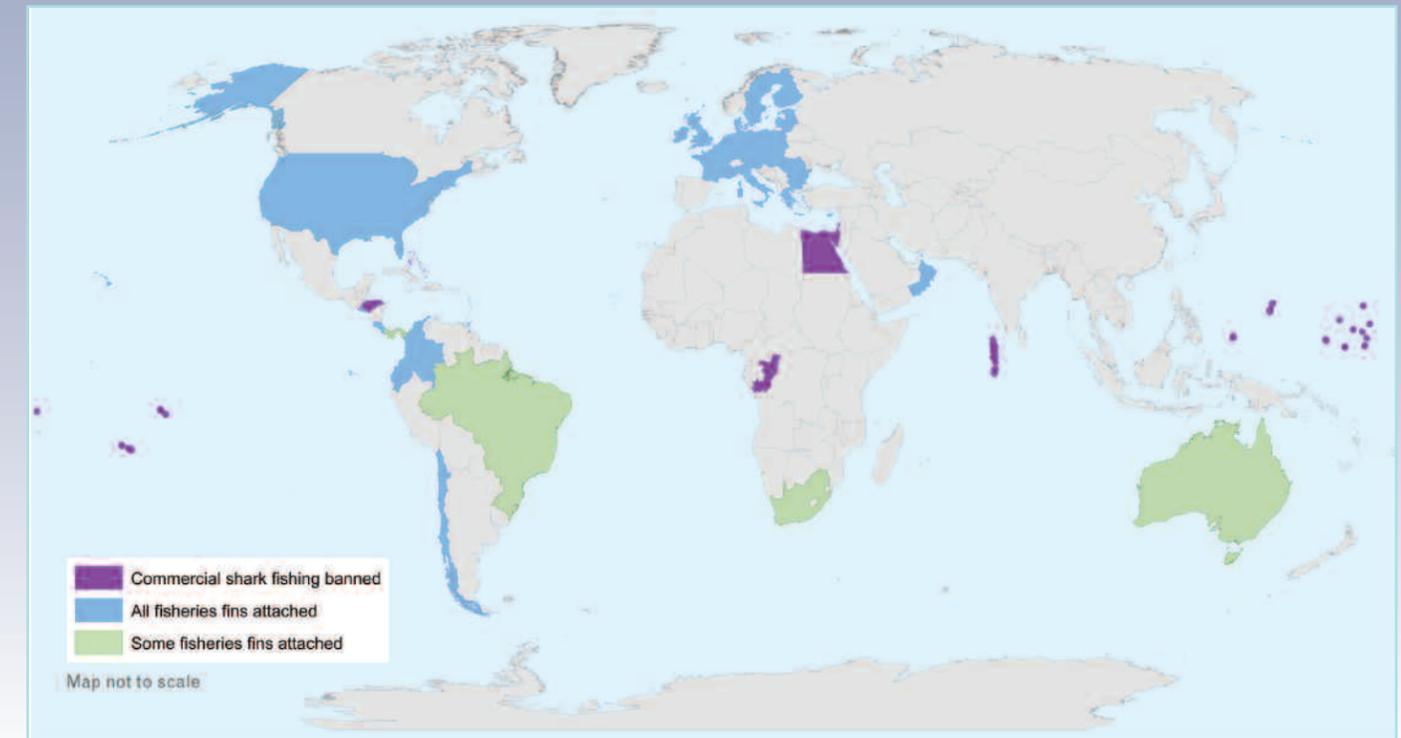
2008

The IUCN World Conservation Congress adopted a resolution calling on shark fishing states to require sharks be landed with their fins naturally attached to their bodies at the first point of landing, allowing for partial detachment of fins to permit efficient storage and species identification.⁷

2009

The Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (IOTC) Working Party on Ecosystems and Bycatch (WPEB) recommended that the IOTC fin-to-carcass ratio be replaced with a requirement that sharks be landed with their fins naturally attached to the body. The WPEB based its advice on conclusions that such a policy was the best way to ensure correct catch statistics and biological information and reduce or avoid finning.⁸

Countries with regulations requiring sharks to be landed with their fins naturally attached.⁹



2010

The resumed Review Conference on the Agreement for the Implementation of the United Nations Fish Stocks Agreement recommended strengthening enforcement of existing prohibitions on shark finning by requiring that sharks be landed with their fins naturally attached or through different means that are equally effective and enforceable.¹⁰

2011

The Joint Tuna RFMO Technical Working Group on By-Catch noted that a fins naturally attached requirement would improve species identification and enforcement and should be considered as part of existing shark finning bans.¹¹

DEBUNKING MYTHS

Fishing fleets and nations sometimes use the argument that shark fins and carcasses must be unloaded in different ports because they are sold to different markets. While it is true that they are often sold to different markets, frozen shark fins and carcasses are often landed together at the same port, and fresh sharks are often landed whole with their fins attached. While there may be exceptions to these practices, landing fins and carcasses together is both possible and practical.

Another argument used by the fishing industry is that freezing sharks without removing their fins first would make handling difficult and storage inefficient. The argument is that stiff, intact animals with jutting fins take up too much room in the vessel’s hold and can be difficult to handle. However, an effective solution for this problem has already been found and is being implemented in various countries: a partial fin cut that allows the fin to flop over before freezing.

Fishermen also claim that processing at sea is necessary to prevent fresh shark meat from spoiling. However, landing sharks with fins still naturally attached does not prevent gutting and beheading at sea and therefore does not impact the quality of the meat.



Unloading packs of frozen shark fins from a longliner. Harbour of Las Palmas, Canary Islands, Spain. 2008.