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Dear Members of Congress,

The undersigned scientists urge you to support the Shark Fin Trade Elimination Act in order to remove the United States from the trade in shark fins, improve enforcement of state bans, and reinforce the status of the United States as a leader in shark conservation.

The conservation status of sharks is one of the most pressing biodiversity issues today. Many shark populations are declining worldwide because of fishing.¹ Sharks have been a relatively stable force in ocean ecosystems over evolutionary time, and possess a unique combination of ecological traits that makes them especially vulnerable to exploitation.²⁻⁵ In the last few decades, exploitation of their populations has rapidly escalated, mainly due to an increased demand for shark fins from Asian markets. Conservative estimates suggest that fins from between 27 and 73 million sharks end up in the global shark fin trade every year.⁶ As a result, sharks and their relatives are now one of the most endangered groups of animals in the ocean.⁷

Sharks declines and extinction can have significant impacts on marine ecosystems. Many species of sharks are top predators and have the potential to structure ecosystems in crucial ways. Large sharks can control the abundance of large marine animals such as seals, turtles and smaller sharks for which natural mortality is usually low and mostly caused by shark predation.⁸ When this control disappears sharks' prey may increase disproportionately with consequences that can cascade down throughout the oceans and over long periods of time. Because of these characteristics, declines in shark populations can trigger domino effects through food webs. Smaller sharks, rays, fish and marine mammals can increase in number, extend their distributions, or change their feeding habitats because of decreased predation risk, and in turn consume greater numbers of smaller fish, crustaceans or shellfish, including some commercially-important species.⁸⁻¹³

To respond to this problem the United States enacted laws to protect many shark species. The Shark Finning Prohibition Act ended the brutal practice of finning, the removal of the sharks' fins while discarding their bodies at sea, and the Shark Conservation Act eventually closed some of its loopholes ensuring that sharks are landed with their fins naturally attached to their bodies. However, the United States continues to allow the buying and selling of fins. Five of the 11 countries that export shark fins to the U.S. do not prohibit shark finning.^{14,15} Therefore, while the U.S. bans shark finning in its own waters, it indirectly promotes this practice elsewhere and perpetuates the global trade in shark fins. Furthermore, because identifying species from detached and processed fins is difficult, it is hard to prevent the sale of sharks in danger of extinction that are listed under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora. Indeed, genetic tests have shown that shark fins from protected and prohibited species end up in bowls of shark fin soup served in the U.S.¹⁶⁻¹⁹

Therefore we urge Congress to ban the sale of shark fins nationwide via the Shark Fin Trade Elimination Act. Eleven states (Texas, Delaware, Hawaii, Illinois, Massachusetts, Maryland, New York, Oregon, Rhode Island, California, and Washington) and 3 territories (American Samoa, Guam, and the North Mariana Islands) have already banned the trade of shark fin products. The Shark Fin Trade Elimination Act would remove the United States from the fin trade altogether, improve enforcement capabilities, and reinforce the status of the United States as a leader in shark conservation.

Yours sincerely,

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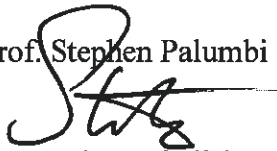
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