

sharks in trouble: preventing population collapse and improving CITES compliance

1,000+

species of sharks and rays

100+ millionsharks are killed in
commercial fisheries each
year

▶ A great hammerhead shark.



The European Union (EU) has long been a champion for shark listings under CITES, sponsoring at least half of the currently listed species and as a significant funder of implementation efforts to ensure these listings have been effective and enforceable. Shark listings, and the unprecedented global effort to support proper implementation for sharks and rays under CITES, has had a cascading effect across the world, prompting governments to prioritise the management of these species, often for the first time.

Without the leadership and support of the EU, many of these 'Endangered' and 'Critically Endangered' species would have little or no management today.

However, many unlisted shark populations continue to plummet, and much of the trade driving these declines remains unmanaged.

The need for continued EU leadership on sharks via CITES is stronger than ever.

Given past support for shark listings and significant investment in effective and enforceable implementation under CITES, IFAW has identified two critical steps the EU must take ahead of CITES CoP19:

- ▶ **Propose bonnethead shark, with Family Sphyrnidae as lookalikes, on Appendix II to close a potential illegal trade loophole in current listings**
- ▶ **Address the continuing rapid decline of global shark populations and counteract compliance loopholes by proposing, sponsoring or supporting any proposal to list additional highly traded sharks on Appendix II of CITES**



79%

reduction in bonnethead shark populations globally, and in some regions over 80% within the last three generations

- ◀ A bonnethead shark.
- ▶ A scalloped hammerhead shark.

1 Pérez-Jiménez, J.C. 2014. [Historical records reveal potential extirpation of four hammerhead sharks \(*Sphyrna* spp.\) in Mexican Pacific waters.](#) *Rev Fish Biol Fisheries*.

2 Abercrombie, D. And Chapman, D. 2012. Identifying shark fins: Oceanic whitetip, porbeagle and hammerheads

3 Fields et al. 2018. [“Species composition of the international shark fin trade assessed through a retail market survey in Hong Kong.”](#) *Conservation Biology*.

4 Cardeñosa et al. 2020. [“Species composition of the largest shark fin retail-market in mainland China.”](#) *Scientific Reports*.

5 Cardeñosa et al. 2019. “Small fins, large trade: a snapshot of the species composition of low-value shark fins in the Hong Kong markets.” *Animal Conservation*.

Severe population declines

Bonnethead shark populations have been reduced by up to 79% globally, and in some regions over 80% within the last three generations, exceeding the CITES Appendix II guidelines for marine species, and they have already been wiped out from portions of their distribution due to overexploitation¹.

Stock assessments and species-specific landings data are often not afforded to coastal sharks such as bonnethead. However, we can tell from the widespread local-level reporting of significant population declines, and regional assessments of bonnethead sharks as ‘Critically Endangered’, that populations are in serious trouble.

A CITES Appendix II listing would enable trade to be restricted from the majority of populations that need to recover, provide data to fill in any remaining gaps, and show where populations are healthy enough for trade to continue.

The EU must propose a CITES Appendix II listing for the endangered bonnethead shark, and seek to close the potential illegal trade loophole by proposing the rest of the Family Sphyrnidae (currently comprised of *Sphyrna media*, *Sphyrna tudes*, *Sphyrna corona*, *Sphyrna gilberti* and *Eusphyrna blochii*) as lookalikes at CITES CoP19.

Documented lookalikes for species already listed under the Convention

CITES parties adopted the large-bodied hammerhead sharks (*Sphyrna lewini*, *Sphyrna zygaena*, *Sphyrna mokorran*) into Appendix II of the Convention at CoP16 in 2013. All hammerhead fins, both large and small-bodied, have very similar appearance.² At the time of the CoP16 proposal, the FAO Expert Panel flagged this as a concern, stating “it is not clear why the other species in the family Sphyrnidae were not proposed to be listed as ‘lookalikes’.”

However, in 2013, there was no data showing that the fins of small hammerhead species were found in trade—and therefore were not included as lookalikes in the proposal to list large-bodied hammerheads at CoP16. Recent studies have shown that these small-bodied sharks are now being traded for their fins, and there is a significant trade in small fins occurring that was previously unknown.^{3 4 5}

Now that we are aware of the international trade in small hammerhead fins, it is a clear implementation and compliance issue.

Animals Committee documents AC30 Inf. 14 and AC Com. 8 also flagged that customs and enforcement officers are likely encountering both listed and non-listed hammerhead species in their day-to-day work, but not able to differentiate. These documents also highlighted that it’s possible that listed species are being labelled and traded as non-listed hammerhead species, creating the potential for illegal trade to be occurring.



Photo: Shane Gross



Photo: Ilan Elgrably

20%

of surveyed reefs were found to have shark populations that were functionally extinct, with reef sharks almost completely absent from reefs in several countries

71%

reduction in global pelagic shark populations since 1970, leaving over 75% of them threatened with extinction

◀ Caribbean reef sharks.

▶ A dusky shark in the Mediterranean.

6 MacNeil et al. 2020. "Global status and conservation potential of reef sharks." *Nature*.

7 Pacoureau et al. 2021. "Half a century of global decline in oceanic sharks and rays." *Nature*.

▶ **see how at ifaw.org**



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Preventing the collapse of global shark populations

Two major studies have been released showing that global shark declines are far worse and more wide-ranging than previously thought.

A landmark global paper highlights the severity of the situation for reef-associated sharks globally.⁶ The paper finds widespread depletion of reef sharks across much of the world's tropical oceans. The paper's key finding:

- ▶ The profound impact of over-fishing on reef shark populations: no sharks were found on almost 20% of the surveyed reefs, rendering them functionally extinct, with reef sharks almost completely absent from reefs in several countries.

Another global study found 'an alarming, ongoing, worldwide decline in oceanic shark populations across the world's largest ecosystem over the past half-century.'⁷ This study's key findings:

- ▶ Global pelagic shark populations have dropped by 71.1% since 1970, leaving over 75% of them threatened with extinction.
- ▶ Oceanic sharks are likely the most threatened group of species on the planet, plant or animal.

The main driver of these declines is international demand for meat and fins, coupled with widespread lack of management for shark species. Currently, 25% of the international trade in shark fins is

managed by CITES. However, considering the high vulnerability of these species to overfishing and comparatively high value of shark fins, international demand will likely continue to drive shark species towards extinction in the near future.

Knowing this, allowing unmanaged commercial trade in shark species to continue is no longer responsible. To prevent the need for Appendix I listings in the future which would end the trade, any species found in the international trade should be listed in Appendix II to ensure trade is properly regulated.

The EU must submit, co-sponsor, or support any proposals to include additional shark species on Appendix II at CoP19. Such action is no longer precautionary, but rather necessary, given the widespread and severe declines that are being documented for shark species in trade.

About IFAW

IFAW advocates for sustainable trade limits for shark species threatened by the international demand for shark fins and meat, and provides resources and support to governments seeking to better manage shark and ray populations in their region.

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