

# A Coalition focused on Responsible Regional Conservation of Sharks & Rays



## Overview

**Sharks and rays are among the oceans' most vulnerable yet under-protected animals. Many populations have been seriously overfished, putting entire ecosystems at risk. Most countries lack catch limits for key species, while many finning bans remain weak.**

For the many sharks and rays that are fished by several countries, the international actions by Regional Fisheries Management Organizations (RFMOs) have the potential to swiftly safeguard species throughout their ranges.

The sharks and rays of the Atlantic Ocean and Mediterranean Sea are particularly beleaguered. International and domestic fisheries management improvements are urgently needed to protect these vulnerable species from overfishing and finning.

Specifically, our coalition is aiming to secure through RFMOs and follow-up national actions:

- Shark and ray catch limits that align with scientific advice,
- Strict protections for endangered species, and
- Strong, enforceable bans on shark finning.

Our efforts are focused on the following RFMOs:

- The International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT),
- The General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM), and
- The Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organization (NAFO).



## The Problem

Most sharks and rays are inherently susceptible to overfishing because they grow slowly, mature late, and produce few young. Many populations are depleted or at serious risk from overfishing through targeted and incidental catches that are too often unregulated. Many species swim across national boundaries and are fished by vessels from several countries. The wasteful practice of “finning” (slicing off a shark’s valuable fins and discarding the body at sea) remains a threat as too many finning bans allow shark fins to be removed at sea while relying on a complicated ratio of fins to bodies landed for enforcement, instead of the most reliable method: prohibiting at-sea fin removal and requiring that fins remain attached through landing.

**Sound management for wide-ranging shark and ray species is urgently needed, and requires many countries working responsibly in concert.**

## Solutions

The world’s RFMOs provide an avenue for swift conservation action throughout shark and ray species’ ranges. These international regulatory bodies are formed by countries with fishing interests in a particular area with power to set fishing limits and other obligations. RFMO decisions are critical to the sustainability of regional shark and ray populations, and can bring significant cascading benefits for other areas and species.

RFMO measures affect fishing on the international waters known as the high seas, but are also meant to result in complementary domestic measures that can reduce risks closer to shore, and in some cases, other oceans. RFMO policies:

- Shark and ray catch limits that align with scientific advice, directly address the main threat to sharks and rays (excessive fishing mortality);
- apply to many countries at once; and
- are often replicated at other RFMOs, potentially expanding safeguards globally.

## Goals

A lot of scientific advice for shark and ray fishing limits has yet to be adopted, particularly for targeted and/or commercially valuable species, but momentum toward more responsible fishing has been building. Improved management by the RFMOs governing Atlantic and Mediterranean fisheries is overdue and essential for the effective conservation of scores of shark and ray species, and could set strong precedents for other regions.

These RFMOs stand out when it comes to actions for sharks and rays:

- ICCAT was the first to assess the status of shark populations and ban finning;
- GFCM has adopted the most sweeping shark/ ray measure (24 species banned in 2012); and
- NAFO has the only internationally allocated shark/ ray quota (for skates).

### The International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT)

ICCAT has before it scientific advice that could lead to groundbreaking catch limits for the world’s most heavily fished oceanic sharks: shortfin mako and blue sharks. If adopted, such measures would prompt the first such limits for European Union fleets (which have the world’s highest landings of these species) and could inspire similar measures on a global scale. Meanwhile, support is growing among ICCAT members for a stronger regional finning ban.

**We’re urging ICCAT Parties to agree science-based international fishing limits for shortfin mako and blue sharks, and a ban on removing shark fins at sea.**

### The General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM)

The GFCM 2012 ban on fishing and retaining the 24 species of exceptionally vulnerable Mediterranean shark and ray species (listed on Annex II of the Barcelona Convention, an international environmental treaty aimed at protecting the Mediterranean) includes commercially valuable shortfin makos, endangered guitarfishes, and critically endangered angel sharks. There is, however, very little evidence that the measure has been properly implemented through domestic prohibitions.

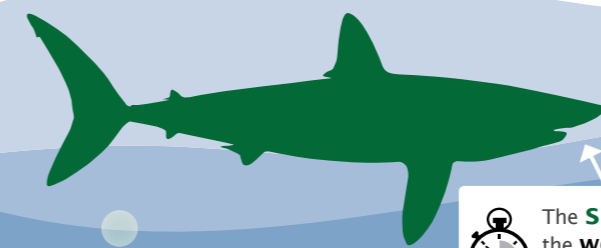
**We’re urging the GFCM to address non-compliance with the shark and ray measure, and its Parties to immediately adopt corresponding national bans, as agreed in 2012.**

### The Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organization (NAFO)

NAFO began limiting the region’s international skate fisheries in 2004, but quotas have remained higher than the level advised by scientists. The excessive catch limits leave room for serious overfishing, particularly for depleted thorny skates. There is also need to examine the sustainability of exceptionally vulnerable deep sea shark species that are taken incidentally in NAFO fisheries.

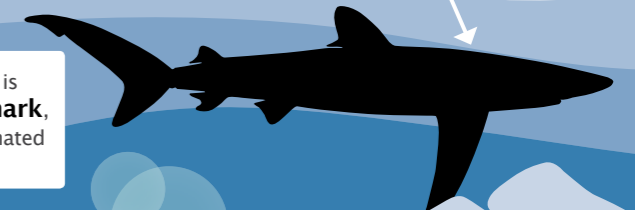
**We’re urging NAFO Parties to reduce skate quotas to align with scientific advice, and to safeguard deep sea sharks.**

## Fast facts



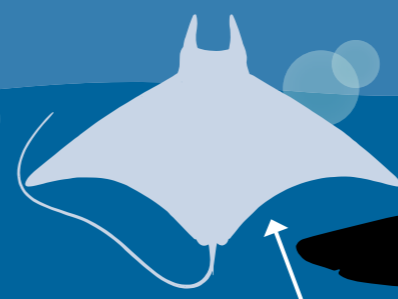
The **shortfin mako** is the **world’s fastest shark**, with bursts of speed estimated at upwards of 30mph.

**Spain** is the global leader in landings of **blue shark**, the world’s most heavily fished shark\*.



Scientists estimate that the **Greenland shark** can live **400 years**.

**Guitarfish** are rays, but their fins are exceptionally valuable for **shark fin soup**.



**Giant devil rays** usually give birth to just **one pup** every two to three years.



**Angel sharks** are **ambush hunters** that lie buried in the **sand** and then burst from cover, protruding their jaws to engulf prey within a fraction of a second.

\* (~69,000 tons in 2014, according to FAO)

## Partners

Sustained engagement by experienced conservationists is vital for driving ambitious policies that ensure long-term sustainability of shared resources. The organizations that make up the Shark League have exceptional collective experience in science-based shark conservation and a history of successful collaboration.



**Shark Advocates International** (Washington, DC, USA) is a project of The Ocean Foundation based on 25 years of expertise in securing science-based shark and ray fishing limits, threatened species protections, and finning bans at local, national, and international levels.

**Shark Trust** (Devon, UK) is the United Kingdom's leading conservation organization dedicated to sharks and rays, with a 20-year record of effective independent and collaborative advocacy toward key UK and EU policy gains.

**Project AWARE** (California, USA) brings to the shark and ray policy debate the special, influential voice of its global constituency of 1.2 million scuba divers, along with an extensive network for communications and citizen action.

**Ecology Action Centre** (Nova Scotia, Canada) is a recognized leader in Canadian conservation policy, and the only Canadian conservation group consistently engaging on shark policy issues at national and international levels.

[www.sharkleague.org](http://www.sharkleague.org) – [info@sharkleague.org](mailto:info@sharkleague.org)

The Shark League for the Atlantic and Mediterranean is funded by the Global Partnership for Sharks and Rays

Credits: Shark illustrations © Mark Dando. Photos: shortfin mako (*Isurus oxyrinchus*) © Greg Skomal; common guitarfish (*Rhinochimaera rhinobatus*) blickwinkel/Alamy Stock Photo; blue shark (*Prionace glauca*) © Nature Picture Library/Alamy stock photo; Greenland shark (*Somniosus microcephalus*) © Nature Picture Library/Alamy Stock Photo; common angel shark (*Squatina squatina*) © Andy Murch; thorny skate (*Amblyraja radiata*) © blickwinkel/Alamy Stock Photo.



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