

News Release

Media Contact: Hannah Tarrant (UK): +1 44 7855 386083
Liz Morley (US): +1 843 693 5044



Shark and Skate Conservation Proposals Fail at NAFO

Northwest Atlantic fishing countries reject both scientific advice for thorny skates and best practice for preventing finning

Vigo, Spain. September 26, 2014. Northwest Atlantic fishing powers meeting this week in Europe's largest fishing port have rejected proposals to improve international safeguards for skates and sharks in the region. The members of the Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organization (NAFO) failed to reach consensus on a US proposal to cut allowable catches of threatened skates to the level advised by scientists, or on a US-EU proposal to strengthen the ban on shark finning (slicing off a shark's fins and discarding the body at sea). The EU, the NAFO member with the largest skate quota, could not accept skate catch reductions, while Canada's lack of support for banning at-sea removal of shark fins helped Japan and Korea defeat the measure.

"Once again, despite promising proposals, the NAFO meeting has ended with deeply disappointing results for some of the North Atlantic's most vulnerable species," said Sonja Fordham, President of Shark Advocates International. "Too many member countries continue to assign low priority to skates and sharks, and have put the interests of their fishermen above commitments to heed scientific advice and the precautionary approach."

At the end of late-night negotiations, NAFO Parties agreed to maintain the thorny skate total allowable catch (TAC) at 7,000 metric tons (t), which is substantially higher than the level advised by scientists and proposed by the US (5,000t). Countries did commit, however, to take action if skate catches rise above 5,000t.

Northwest Atlantic skates are targeted and taken as bycatch mainly by vessels from Spain and Portugal. Canada and Russia also have quota shares based on historical catches. Thorny skates, which are classified by IUCN as *Threatened*, make up the vast majority (~95%) of this mixed skate catch. Although skate catches in recent years have been near 5,000t (below the TAC), the population has shown little improvement under NAFO management and is at risk if vessels from countries with skate quota allocations increase skate fishing (take their allotments). This risk is now heightened as NAFO decided this week to increase fishing on Greenland halibut and witch flounder, species often taken together with skates.

"Scientists have long warned that thorny skates have low reproductive capacity, due to slow growth and few offspring, and that this population is at a low level," remarked Ali Hood of the UK's Shark Trust. "We are deeply disappointed that the EU opposed a reduction in the NAFO skate TAC, thereby putting exceptionally vulnerable species at risk for further depletion. It is now up to the EU to ensure its skate catches from this area do not increase in 2014, and to raise the priority of following NAFO scientific advice in future years."

NAFO banned shark finning in 2005, but allows shark fins to be removed at sea and stored separately from shark carcasses onboard, as long as the fin-to-carcass weight ratio does not exceed 5%. Using ratios to enforce finning bans has proved complicated and difficult.

"Requiring that sharks be landed with their fins still naturally attached is widely recognized as the most reliable method for preventing shark finning," explained Ania Budziak of Project AWARE. "We are grateful that the US and EU are promoting this best practice worldwide, but we urge them to raise the priority of this goal, expand efforts to demonstrate the method's success, and continue work to increase the number of countries co-sponsoring these important initiatives in international fishery arenas."

NAFO Contracting Parties include Canada, Cuba, Denmark (in respect to the Faroe Islands & Greenland), the European Union, France (in respect to Saint Pierre et Miquelon), Iceland, Japan, Republic of Korea, Norway, Russian Federation, Ukraine, and the US. NAFO Parties develop international management measures for Northwest Atlantic fish (except salmon, tunas/marlins, and sedentary species).

*Shark Advocates International, a project of The Ocean Foundation, works to safeguard sharks and rays through science-based policies.
The Shark Trust is a UK charity working to advance the worldwide conservation of sharks through science, education, influence and action.
Project AWARE Foundation is a growing movement of scuba divers protecting the ocean planet – one dive at a time.*