Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organization (NAFO)

2018 Position Statement: Skates & Sharks

Shark League for the Atlantic and Mediterranean

The Shark League is focused on conservation of sharks and rays (elasmobranchs) because low reproductive capacity leaves most species exceptionally vulnerable to overexploitation. Under the Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organization (NAFO), our coalition has been working towards the following for elasmobranchs:

- Measures to improve catch reporting and minimize incidental mortality
- Fishing limits based on science and the precautionary approach, and
- Protections for especially vulnerable species.

We appreciate the opportunity to share our perspectives on actions at the 2018 annual meeting that could begin to address the precarious state of several Atlantic elasmobranch species.

In line with advice from the NAFO Scientific Council, we urge NAFO to immediately:

- **Prohibit the retention of Greenland sharks, and adopt other recommended measures to reduce incidental mortality, and**
- **Reduce the skate Total Allowable Catch (TAC) from 7000t to 4000t.**

In addition, to improve elasmobranch management over the long term, we urge NAFO to:

- Require significantly increased observer coverage and elasmobranch catch reporting detail, and
- Direct the NAFO Scientific Council to expand on the next steps for:
  - o minimizing incidental mortality of Greenland sharks and other deep sea species, and
  - o establishing reference points for a thorny skate rebuilding plan.

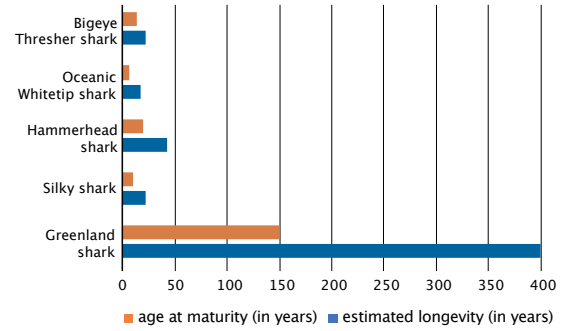
Spotlight on Greenland Sharks *(Somniosus microcephalus)*

The Greenland shark, the second largest carnivorous shark, is considered the world's longest living vertebrate. In 2016, scientists estimated that Greenland sharks don't reach sexual maturity until ~156 years of age (± 22 years) and can live more than 400 years (392 ± 120 years). This finding and inferences about the species' vulnerability to overfishing led to widespread concern and review by NAFO's Scientific Council.

Greenland sharks are associated with the high latitudes of the North Atlantic and Arctic waters at depths up to 3000m. Growing to more than 6m (21 feet), they were heavily fished in the first half of the 20th century for liver oil. Today, Greenland sharks are taken primarily as incidental catch in a variety of fisheries, and also targeted for meat by vessels from Greenland and Iceland.

As part of a groundbreaking status review beginning in 2017, NAFO scientists have highlighted the extreme longevity and low fecundity of Greenland sharks, and noted other Regional Fishery Management Organization decisions to prohibit retention of inherently vulnerable shark species. In its final 2018 report, the NAFO Scientific Council is recommending:

- A prohibition on the retention and landing of Greenland sharks
- A requirement for live release of those captured
- Promotion of safe handling practices
- Other measures such as gear restrictions and area closures aimed at keeping fishing mortality as close to zero as possible, and
- Improved reporting of catch data for all sharks, including species, numbers, size, sex, and discard disposition.



Spotlight on Thorny Skates *(Amblyraja radiata)*

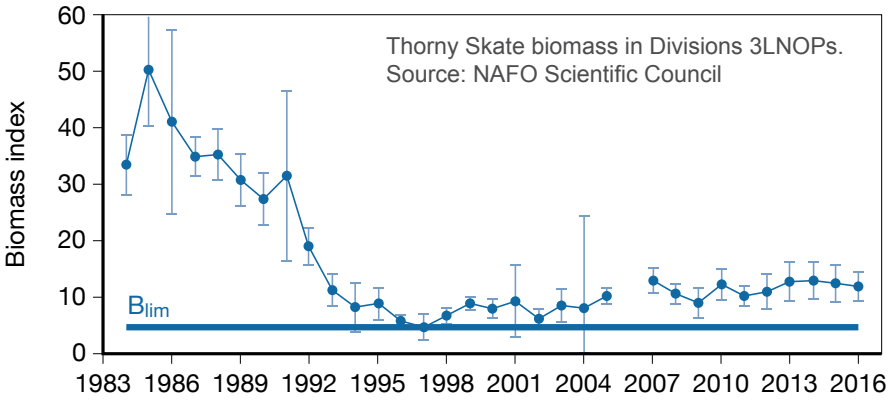
Thorny skates are widely distributed across a variety of substrates down to 1400m on both sides of the Atlantic. Females mature at around age 11 and produce only about 15 viable hatchlings each year after incubation that can last three years. Thorny skates have been severely depleted in the southern part of their distribution, declining by as much as 95 percent since the 1970s in some US waters.

The NAFO Scientific Council has demonstrated that:

- Skates have low resilience to fishing pressure due to low population growth rates
- The Division 3LNO thorny skate population is low, and
- NAFO management has resulted in little stock rebuilding.

Adherence to scientific advice is a key element of the NAFO Convention and to the national policies of many NAFO Parties. Yet, the NAFO skate TAC has been significantly higher than the level advised by scientists since it was agreed in 2004. The population has not significantly improved even though recent reported catches have aligned with scientific advice, underscoring the need for greater attention and caution. Excessive catch limits leave room for serious overfishing, particularly for thorny skates.

The Scientific Council has advised, "given the low resilience to fishing mortality and higher historic stock levels," that skate catches not increase beyond recent levels (~4000t). In addition, more detailed catch data are needed for scientists to develop a robust thorny skate assessment and predict the rebuilding progress expected at various TAC levels. Implementation of the "Action Plan for the Management and Minimization of Bycatch and Discards" (COM Doc. 17-26) would help achieve these goals.



Timely and Warranted Actions

We stress that:

- science-based skate fishing limits and
- protections for exceptionally vulnerable deep sea elasmobranchs (starting with Greenland sharks)

are wholly consistent with the recent NAFO Convention amendments that underscore Parties' commitments to:

- Preventing overfishing and ensuring long-term sustainability
- Heeding the best scientific advice available
- Applying the precautionary approach
- Minimizing incidental catch and harmful impacts on marine ecosystems
- Preserving biological diversity, and
- Collecting and sharing sound fishing data in a timely manner.

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