

## **Make or Break for Endangered Atlantic Mako Sharks**

***International Tuna Fishery Managers Resume Negotiations That Could Result in Overdue, Historic Protection***

**Madrid, Spain. November 15, 2021.** Conservationists are focused this week on the annual meeting of the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) and the possibility of a new agreement to protect seriously overfished North Atlantic shortfin mako sharks. Since 2017, scientists have recommended a ban on retention as the most effective immediate step toward reversing decline and rebuilding the population over about 50 years. Such a ban has been repeatedly proposed by many ICCAT Parties, led most recently by Canada, Senegal, Gabon, and the UK. The main obstacles have been the EU and the US whose competing proposals for exceptions have prevented consensus for years.

“This meeting is truly a make-or-break moment for makos,” said Sonja Fordham, President of Shark Advocates International. “Depletion of the North Atlantic population is among the world’s most pressing yet solvable shark conservation crises. The proposed ban is science-based, straightforward, and urgently needed to avoid additional harm to the population and associated ecosystem. The US and EU have otherwise solid records for leading shark conservation initiatives. We are eager to see these influential ICCAT Parties end their opposition to a full, long-term mako ban and help ensure adoption without further delay.”

Prized for meat, fins, and sport, shortfin makos are among the Atlantic’s most valuable and imperiled sharks. Slow growth makes them exceptionally vulnerable to overfishing. Makos are fished by many nations around the globe yet not subject to international fishing quotas. The EU, Morocco, and the US were the highest ranking ICCAT Parties for North Atlantic shortfin mako landings in 2020. In 2019, the EU helped list makos on Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). As a result, Parties must demonstrate that mako exports are sourced from legal, sustainable fisheries.

The EU remains the primary threat to realizing a sound new mako agreement. EU vessels have long taken the lion’s share of North Atlantic mako landings but didn’t limit them until this year. Spain, the top mako shark fishing country, waited until 2020 to set a national quota only to have the Spanish fleet land more than double the allotment. Both Spain and Portugal have established mako fishing limits since the CITES listing, but the measures have changed considerably in the short time they’ve been in effect. Meanwhile, there has been an outpouring of support for mako protection from various EU sectors, including conservationists, scientists, aquariums, and seafood sustainability advocates, as well as concerned citizens.

“We are hopeful that the overwhelming concern for makos expressed over several years by a multitude of stakeholders from across the EU has finally provided sufficient support for the European Commission to join the many countries working for effective mako protection, starting with a North Atlantic ban,” said Ali Hood, Director of Conservation for the Shark Trust. “Accepting a complete prohibition offers the EU the opportunity to not only become part of the solution for makos, but to streamline a problematic patchwork of restrictions and set a much-needed example for aligning the obligations of fisheries and environment treaties.”

ICCAT has 52 Contracting Parties, including the European Union. The virtual annual meeting runs through November 23.

“We encourage the many ICCAT member countries that have countered short-term vested interests and pressed for science-based mako protection to keep up the effort through this crucial meeting,” said Shannon Arnold, Marine Program Coordinator for Ecology Action Centre. “Thanks to leadership from Canada, Senegal, Gabon, and the UK, a mako rebuilding plan based on the advised ban is now within reach and, if adopted, could turn the tide for this valuable, beleaguered shark.”

ICCAT will also consider proposals to strengthen its shark finning ban and allocate quotas for South Atlantic blue sharks.

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**Notes to Editors:** The Shark Trust is a UK charity working to safeguard the future of sharks through positive change. Ecology Action Centre promotes sustainable, ocean-based livelihoods, and marine conservation in Canada and internationally. Project AWARE is a global movement for ocean protection powered by a community of adventurers. Shark Advocates International is a project of The Ocean Foundation dedicated to securing science-based policies for sharks and rays. These groups, with support from the Shark Conservation Fund, formed the [Shark League](#) of the Atlantic and Mediterranean to advance responsible regional shark and ray conservation policies.

ICCAT is responsible for conservation of tunas and tuna-like species in the Atlantic Ocean and adjacent seas. ICCAT scientists updated the [status of Atlantic shortfin mako sharks](#) in 2019. Proposals for ICCAT mako measures are posted on the [ICCAT meeting site](#).

The shortfin mako is classified as [Endangered](#) on the IUCN Red List.

Countries supporting the science-based North Atlantic mako ban over recent years include Canada, Senegal, the Gambia, Gabon, Panama, Liberia, Guatemala, Angola, El Salvador, Egypt, Norway, Guinea Bissau, Uruguay, Japan, China, and Taiwan.

Countries reporting 2020 catches of North Atlantic makos (*Isurus oxyrinchus*) include (in order of magnitude): EU (Spain and Portugal), Morocco, US, Venezuela, Mexico, and Trinidad and Tobago. EU fishing vessels were responsible for 74% of reported catches of North Atlantic shortfin makos in 2020.

In 2017, ICCAT mandated that North Atlantic makos brought to boat alive must be carefully released, unless the country has imposed a minimum size limit (at about the length of maturity) or a discard ban (that prevents profit). Dead makos can be still be landed (and sold) by boats under 12 meters, and by larger vessels under certain conditions for monitoring catch and reporting data. Scientists quickly demonstrated that the measure was inadequate to end overfishing, much less rebuild the population.

Shortfin makos ranked first among 20 pelagic shark stocks for vulnerability to ICCAT fisheries based on Euclidean distance and third overall in an [Ecological Risk Assessment](#) for sharks conducted by ICCAT scientists in 2012.