

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Bridging the Gaps that Hinder Shark Conservation

An analysis of ICCAT Parties' policies for CITES-listed
Atlantic elasmobranchs

By Sonja Fordham, Ali Hood, Shannon Arnold, Daniel Kachelriess, and Julia Lawson



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Elasmobranchs (sharks and rays) are threatened mainly by overfishing, with international trade as a key driver. Over the last few decades, significant strides toward shark conservation have been made through the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES, a global wildlife treaty) and the International Commission for Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT, a regional fishery management organization). Because sharks and rays are considered both commodities and wildlife, governments' approaches toward elasmobranch obligations under fisheries and environment agreements are, however, often misaligned. The success of international conservation measures relies on proper implementation at the national level. An associated lack of scrutiny is a core yet surmountable challenge to effective policies and population rebuilding. This analysis documents the performance of ICCAT's 52 Parties and five Cooperators (CPCs) with respect to conservation obligations for Atlantic elasmobranch species listed under CITES between 2002 and 2020, highlights key policy and implementation gaps, and recommends priority improvements at national and international levels.

The vast majority of species listed under CITES are included under Appendix II, which mandates trade permits aimed at ensuring that exports are legally and sustainably sourced. Exporting Parties are to assess the threat to species' survival and issue a "non-detriment finding" (NDF) before granting permits. NDFs need not be public but CITES invites sharing on their site. CITES regulation extends to landing of listed species taken on the high seas, known as "introduction from the sea" (IFS). Fisheries management is key to CITES implementation.

ICCAT banned shark finning in 2004 and has generally prohibited the retention, etc. of bigeye

threshers (2009), oceanic whitetip sharks (2010), most hammerhead species (with exceptions, 2010), and silky sharks (with exceptions, 2011). A live release measure for porbeagles was adopted in 2015, North Atlantic shortfin mako retention was banned (short-term) in 2021, and South Atlantic shortfin mako quotas were allocated in 2022.

With respect to elasmobranchs, this analysis explores problematic gaps *in*:

- CITES and ICCAT protections (through reservations and exceptions);
- nations' species-specific reporting of trade, landings, discards, and regulations; and
- transparency associated with essential exploitation statistics.

Also addressed are gaps *between*:

- commitments and compliance;
- governments' policy stances and regulatory actions; and
- environmental and fisheries authorities' policy work.

Despite a rising profile at CITES, sharks and rays are less valuable than traditional food fish and remain a relatively low priority for fisheries bodies. Participation by conservationists is more robust at CITES than at ICCAT. There has been inadequate recognition of competence between the two worlds and generally low interest among experts for engaging in both.

Seven ICCAT CPCs have taken **reservations** on CITES elasmobranch listings: **Japan, Norway, Iceland, Guyana, Republic of Korea, Namibia, and South Africa**. The CITES **database** has yet to reflect a complete picture of global trade in the species. A particular lack of pelagic shark trade data reveals inadequate **IFS** implementation. Thirteen CPCs have reported commercial trade in CITES-listed sharks without a public **NDF**. Only four ICCAT CPCs have publicized negative NDFs for sharks. Only three have public NDFs for more than one shark species. Expanded CITES

Overview of ICCAT actions & key dates for CITES-listed Atlantic elasmobranchs

Oceanic Whitetip	Silky Shark	Hammerheads	Porbeagle	Bigeye Thresher	Common Thresher	Shortfin Mako
ICCAT Ban 2010	ICCAT Ban* 2011	ICCAT Ban* 2010	ICCAT Live Release 2015	ICCAT Ban 2009	No ICCAT Limits	ICCAT Limits 2021
CITES II 2013	CITES II 2013	CITES II 2013	CITES II 2013	CITES II 2016	CITES II 2016	CITES II 2019

* exceptions apply



Scalloped hammerhead shark (*Sphyrna lewini*). © Ethan Daniels/Shutterstock

data and NDFs hold promise for informing ICCAT compliance processes. In turn, improved ICCAT information on populations, fishing, and compliance can contribute to NDFs and overall CITES implementation.

Because exports are tied to countries, not **ocean regions**, it is difficult to use international fisheries measures (which vary across the globe) to evaluate the legality of fishing operations from which elasmobranch products originate. Until reporting becomes region-specific, CITES shark trade data is most illuminating within the ICCAT context for CPCs fishing only in the Atlantic. The first CITES **Reviews of Significant Trade** (RSTs) for elasmobranch species, agreed in 2023, focus on hammerheads and oceanic whitetip sharks, and involve ICCAT CPCs **Mexico, Nicaragua, Senegal**, and the **People’s Republic of China (PR China)**.

Lack of data with respect to elasmobranch trade and fishing is a primary and persistent hurdle to

population assessment, compliance monitoring, and conservation. Governments’ reports are too often incomplete, inconsistent, late, or non-existent. It is also hard to tell if increased landings reflect higher fishing pressure or simply better reporting, and similarly, if lacking records are the result of compliance or depletion.

The **EU** is the top ICCAT CPC for **elasmobranch fishing**, with landings that exceed those reported by all other ICCAT CPCs *combined*. **Nigeria** ranks second among ICCAT CPCs for elasmobranch landings reported to FAO but not even in the top 20 with respect to ICCAT sharks, owing to significant coastal fisheries and inadequate ICCAT reporting. Similar stories can be told for several other African countries: **Sierra Leone, Angola, Mauritania, Guinea, and Egypt**. Coastal catches commonly reported to FAO but not ICCAT include CITES-listed Atlantic elasmobranchs, such as hammerheads and guitarfishes. Countries with significant discrepancies between ICCAT and FAO elasmobranch reporting include **PR China, Spain, Portugal, and Liberia**.

Despite ICCAT measures that ban the retention or encourage the release of at least nine shark species, only six ICCAT CPCs report more than 100t of elasmobranch **discards** over the last decade: **Chinese Taipei, USA, EU, Japan, Canada, Republic of Korea**. Most ICCAT CPCs – including five that rank in top ten for ICCAT shark landings (**Namibia, Morocco, Ghana, Senegal, and Belize**) – report none.

While the ICCAT Compliance Committee’s “**Shark Check Sheets**” (aimed at eliciting domestic implementation information from CPCs) have recently increased in number, clarity, and detail, many CPCs still lack domestic regulations to implement ICCAT shark measures and/or fail to report in sufficient detail. **Angola, Côte d’Ivoire, Gambia, Grenada, Guinea Bissau, Guinea, Mauritania, and Namibia** failed to submit at all in 2022.

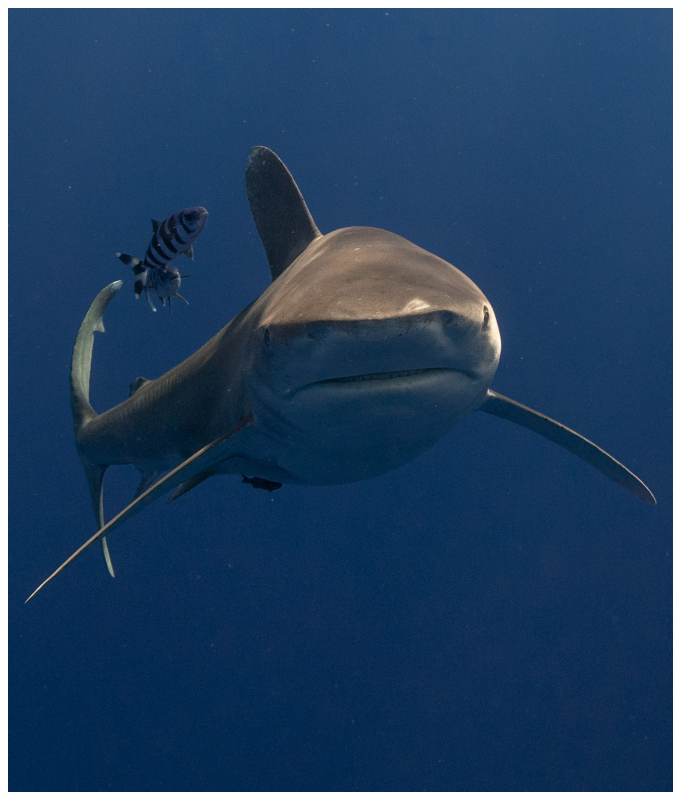
Longfin Mako	White Shark	Basking Shark	Whale Shark	Manta & Devil Rays	Sawfish	Wedgefish & Guitarfish
No ICCAT Limits	No ICCAT Action	No ICCAT Action	No ICCAT Action	No ICCAT Action	No ICCAT Relevance	No ICCAT Relevance
CITES II 2019	CITES II 2004	CITES II 2002	CITES II 2002	CITES II 2013 & 2016	CITES I 2007 & 2013	CITES II 2019

Only eight ICCAT CPCs mentioned **CITES obligations** in their 2022 Shark Check Sheets: **Barbados, Curaçao, EU (Portugal), Liberia, Morocco, Senegal, Costa Rica, and Guyana**. Only 12 CPCs report plans to increase **observer coverage/electronic monitoring** on longliner vessels to the agreed 10%. Efforts to strengthen ICCAT's **shark finning** ban by requiring sharks be landed with fins naturally attached have been blocked by Japan since 2009.

Key **species-specific findings** address issues for highly traded, threatened elasmobranchs that are either subject to ICCAT measures or in need of them. While ICCAT's bigeye thresher and oceanic whitetip shark bans are relatively broad and simple, exceptions to the hammerhead and silky shark bans allow developing CPCs to opt out — if they report and try not to increase landings while preventing international trade.

Hammerheads (*Sphyrna* spp.) are captured in both coastal and pelagic fisheries that are often managed separately, leading to partial reporting to ICCAT that hinders effectiveness monitoring. **Trinidad and Tobago, Senegal, and Ghana** account for most of the ~7500t of hammerhead landings reported to ICCAT since 2010. Ghana takes nearly half, gives contradictory answers to ICCAT, and admits a lack of domestic regulations. As Ghana does not report exports, all these catches would need to come from national waters and be consumed domestically to comply with CITES. **Senegal** has reported a hammerhead ban, substantial annual landings, and (in 2015) fin exports. **Trinidad and Tobago** takes an exemption to the ban that allows for substantial hammerhead landings. Exports are reportedly banned; none are reported to CITES. **Côte d'Ivoire** claims to implement the ban yet regularly reports landings. **Brazil** co-sponsored the ICCAT and CITES hammerhead measures yet reported 500+t of landings in 2012. Landings have since ceased under a domestic ban.

There are CITES records of **silky shark** (*Carcharhinus falciformis*) exports from **Nicaragua**, which would conflict with the ICCAT measure but not Pacific rules. Nicaragua's poor reporting to ICCAT and lack of a public NDF hamper evaluation. **Costa Rica** claims an exemption to the silky shark measure but its substantial export (72% of reported global trade) runs counter to its conditions. Determining how much of the trade is sourced from the Atlantic (subject to ICCAT) is complicated by lacking



Oceanic whitetip shark (*Carcharhinus longimanus*). © Andy Mann/Trevor Bacon

information. **Ghana** has reported ~100t of silky shark landings annually since 2016, apparently under an ICCAT exemption and lack of domestic limits. Recent landings are relatively high, but no international trade has been reported to CITES. **Guyana's** 300t of silky shark landings in 2018 may have been due to a data reconstruction project, suggesting significant under-reporting in other years. ICCAT CPCs claiming to be implementing the silky shark ban while reporting more than a ton of annual silky shark landings to ICCAT in 2019 and 2020 include **Mexico, Côte d'Ivoire, Grenada, Liberia, and São Tomé e Príncipe**.

Mexico is the only CPC consistently reporting annual landings of **oceanic whitetip sharks** (*Carcharhinus longimanus*) to ICCAT. **Brazil** reports landings to FAO, but not ICCAT. **Senegal** is the only ICCAT CPC identified as an exporter of the species. **Turks and Caicos, Costa Rica, Guyana, Honduras, and Nicaragua** gave inadequate responses regarding protections. **Dominica's** oceanic whitetip landings underscore the need to expand membership and/or cooperation from non-CPCs.

ICCAT bans retention of **bigeye thresher sharks** (*Alopias superciliosus*) but has yet to limit catch of common threshers (*Alopias vulpinus*). Most ICCAT thresher records are by genus, which hinders compliance monitoring and population

assessment. **Mexico**, the only CPC with an ICCAT bigeye thresher allocation, claims to implement the measure but cites no species-specific limits. Mexico and **Senegal** have been identified by CITES for sharp increases in bigeye thresher exports; neither report landings of this species to ICCAT. Mexico's exports might be sourced from the Pacific where the species is not prohibited; this scenario is unlikely for Senegal.

The dire status of the North Atlantic **shortfin mako** (*Isurus oxyrinchus*) population argues for long-term extension of the ICCAT retention ban. Improvements in reporting and estimating discards are urgently needed. The vast footprint of EU (Spain and Portugal) vessels complicates exploitation tracking. Misreporting and/or increased fishing pressure on similarly vulnerable and valuable **longfin makos** (*Isurus paucus*) is a concern. The EU (Portugal) has been reporting longfin mako landings to FAO but not ICCAT since 2014. Portugal and Spain report substantial high seas longfin mako take. It is difficult to determine how well landings and export records align for such wide-ranging fleets. Only the **USA** reports longfin mako discards to ICCAT.

Catch-all landings and trade reporting make exploitation data particularly lacking for exceptionally vulnerable **manta and devil rays** (*Mobula* spp.). **Venezuela** is responsible for 94% of total landings (2010–2021). Likely due to a regional data enhancement project, the vast majority of Atlantic mobulid catches reported to ICCAT occur in 2017. None were reported to FAO and many CPCs reported only in that year. Only **Mauritania** and the EU (Spain) report Atlantic mobula ray landings to FAO. ICCAT is the only tuna RFMO that has not protected mobula rays.

There are **myriad gaps** that hinder effective shark and ray conservation; bridging them requires deliberate, sustained attention from multiple government agencies as well as stakeholders. ICCAT and CITES have both advanced elasmobranch conservation, and both bodies face implementation challenges stemming from inadequate resources and political will. There is a need to balance the attention given to achieving conservation agreements with the actions to ensure commitments are fulfilled. Science-based fishing and trade limits are among the most urgent needs. Narrowing the highlighted divides is critical to securing a brighter outlook for sharks and rays in the Atlantic and beyond.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Fishing entities and stakeholders are encouraged to actively pursue increased priority and effectiveness of elasmobranch conservation policies at national, regional, and international levels.

Governments — with support from conservationists, scientists, and fishing communities — should:

- improve the integration of marine fisheries and environmental agency activities;
- coordinate the fulfillment of shark and ray obligations across various treaties;
- strive for greater transparency and accountability with respect to implementation;
- submit accurate, complete, timely fisheries and trade data to relevant authorities;
- request / facilitate technical and financial assistance for low-capacity countries; and
- promote complementary actions under other international conservation treaties.

Needs specific to ICCAT include:

- Enforcement of CPC reporting requirements for all elasmobranch catches (including discards);
- Clearer and more detailed CPC responses regarding implementation of ICCAT shark measures;
- Elimination of exceptions to retention bans for hammerhead, silky, and bigeye thresher sharks;
- Long-term extension and augmentation of the North Atlantic shortfin mako retention ban;
- Safeguards for unprotected species, including mobula rays, longfin makos, common threshers, and whale sharks;
- A stronger finning ban through a prohibition on at-sea shark fin removal, without exceptions; and
- 100% observer coverage (human and/or electronic) for large-scale ICCAT fishing vessels;

Needs specific to CITES include:

- Broader and more accurate trade reporting by Parties, including IFS, for listed species;
- Robust NDFs linked to fishing limits posted to the CITES website;
- Rigorous review of significant elasmobranch trade with prompt remedial action;
- Elasmobranch trade reporting by ocean/population;
- Closer examination of EU permitting exceptions associated with bilateral fishing agreements;
- Retraction of reservations on shark and ray listings; and
- Consideration of measures for skate, dogfish, and deep-sea shark species in trade.

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Julia Lawson is a Ph.D. candidate at the Bren School of Environmental Science and Management at the University of California, Santa Barbara focusing on the effectiveness of fisheries and conservation agreements. In her previous role as the IUCN Shark Specialist Group Program Officer (2014–2016), she coordinated numerous Red List of Threatened Species assessments, led the development of a global conservation strategy for devil and manta rays, and served on the IUCN delegation to the CITES Conference of Parties. She has also participated extensively in elasmobranch deliberations of the Convention on Migratory Species. Ms. Lawson holds a Master of Science degree from the University of British Columbia Institute for the Oceans and Fisheries.

About the Shark League

The Shark League of the Atlantic and Mediterranean was formed with support from the Shark Conservation Fund to advance responsible regional shark and ray conservation policies. Shark Advocates International, Ecology Action Centre, Shark Trust, and PADI AWARE Foundation are the coalition's founding members.

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