

Q & A

Protecting North Atlantic Shortfin Mako Sharks

How bad is it? The decline of North Atlantic shortfin makos is among the clearest and most urgent shark conservation crises in the world. The population is seriously overfished and headed for collapse. Recovery is predicted to take decades, even if catch is minimized right away.

What needs to be done? Scientists associated with the International Commission for Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) advise a complete ban on retention of North Atlantic shortfin makos, without exception, along with additional measures to minimize mortality from incidental catch.

How long have countries had to consider this advice? ICCAT scientists have warned about makos' inherent vulnerability for more than a decade. In 2008, they ranked shortfin makos among the sharks at greatest risk from overfishing in Atlantic longline fisheries. This year marks four years since their first specific recommendation for a North Atlantic retention ban (2017). After reassessing in 2019, they underscored this advice.

What has ICCAT done to protect makos? In 2017, ICCAT adopted a complicated suite of mako fishing restrictions that fell far short of expert advice. In 2019, ICCAT scientists demonstrated that the measures were inadequate to stop overfishing, much less allow recovery, and reissued previous advice. ICCAT has been debating additional steps since that time but has failed to reach an agreement.

Is banning the retention of a shark species a big step for ICCAT? Prohibiting retention is by far the most common, species-specific shark conservation measure adopted by the world's Regional Fishery Management Organizations (RFMOs). Starting in 2009, ICCAT has banned retention of bigeye thresher, oceanic whitetip, silky, and several species of hammerhead sharks. ICCAT took these actions based on significantly less information than is available for shortfin makos.

What makes this shark population special? Thanks to relatively long-term catch data and regular, increasingly improving international assessments, we know more about

North Atlantic shortfin makos than we do about most other oceanic shark populations. Shortfin makos are among the world's most economically valuable sharks, prized as sport fish as well as food. This species is exceptionally slow growing. Females mature at about age 20. Litters of no more than 18 pups gestate for up to 18 months.

Is a ban enough? What about closed areas, gear changes, etc.? Scientists recommend prohibiting retention of North Atlantic shortfin mako sharks as the "most effective immediate measure" for stopping overfishing and rebuilding the population. Scientists have also advised additional measures to minimize the mortality associated with incidental catch but have yet to be specific with respect to fishing gear modifications, time/area closures, etc. While countries should request additional advice on bycatch mitigation, it is imperative that ICCAT adopt the main recommendation for a complete ban in the meantime, without further delay. This centerpiece of the scientific advice is essential for realizing the substantial mortality reduction needed to reverse North Atlantic mako decline.

Is an ICCAT ban enforceable? All international fishery restrictions depend on proper implementation by Parties. That means governments promptly adopting complementary domestic regulations, monitoring compliance, and penalizing infractions. One key benefit of the advised ban is its simplicity, which increases the ease of implementation by governments and the potential for monitoring assistance from NGOs and citizens.

What about all the makos that will be discarded dead? The advice from ICCAT scientists is based on catch scenarios that factor in all sources of mortality, including dead discards. A complete ban is expected to be the most effective measure due not only to its simplicity but also the relatively high post-release survival of shortfin makos (up to 77%). To take full advantage of this key factor, it is essential to flip the incentive toward rapid release if not complete avoidance of makos. Currently, exceptions to land dead shortfin makos create incentives for irresponsible fishing practices that cause stress and ensure mortality.



Does the EU discard ban require fishers to land makos?

To implement retention bans adopted by ICCAT, the EU designated bigeye thresher, oceanic whitetip, silky, and several species of hammerhead sharks as prohibited species, thereby exempting them from the EU landings obligation. Fishers are required to promptly release these species and record discards. The same should be done for makos.

How does the 2019 CITES listing for makos factor in?

All ICCAT Parties are also Parties to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) and thereby obligated to ensure that mako exports (including landings from the high seas) are sourced from legal, sustainable fisheries. Although the European Union (EU) has an expert panel providing direction, regulations to fulfil CITES obligations are developed by national authorities. In late 2020, the EU panel concluded all North Atlantic shortfin mako landings should cease. The EU's leading countries for mako landings – Spain and Portugal – then banned high seas mako landings; Spain also banned domestic water take and stockpile sale. The United Kingdom (UK) has concluded that North Atlantic shortfin mako trade is not sustainable.

How does the 2008 CMS/Bonn Convention listing for makos factor in?

About half the ICCAT Parties are also Parties to the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS). The listing of makos CMS Appendix II obligates Parties to cooperate toward regional conservation. Nevertheless, despite repeated requests by NGOs, CMS-ICCAT Parties have done little to promote recognition and fulfilment of CMS commitments through ICCAT.

Would a ICCAT mako ban hinder scientific research?

To date, the proposals for an ICCAT ban have included exceptions for collecting biological samples from dead makos (as is the case for other prohibited shark species). The 2019 CITES listing has introduced new requirements for obtaining permits to transport mako samples.

What countries are leading the charge to secure an ICCAT mako ban?

To date, Canada and Senegal have twice championed proposals for ICCAT to heed scientific advice for shortfin mako limits, including a complete prohibition on retention in the North Atlantic. Canada is also leading by example by unilaterally banning North Atlantic shortfin mako retention in 2020 and currently studying the effects.

What other countries have publicly endorsed this strategy?

Angola, Egypt, El Salvador, Gabon, Gambia, Guatemala, Liberia, Panama, Taiwan, and the UK have cosponsored science-based mako proposals from Senegal and Canada. China, Guinea Bissau, Japan, Norway, and Uruguay have expressed support from the floor.

Which Parties are the main obstacles to ICCAT adopting the recommended mako ban?

The EU and the United States (US) have repeatedly offered competing shortfin mako proposals that include substantial exceptions for landing makos, counter to scientific advice. Meanwhile, the EU and the US have implemented retention bans for at least 20 less valuable Atlantic shark species and have promoted similar actions at RFMOs worldwide. Morocco has ranked 2nd for North Atlantic shortfin mako landings but has not been public about its position on an ICCAT ban since winning exemptions in ICCAT's 2017 mako measure for its <12-meter vessels.

What needs to be done by when? ICCAT Parties are considering their mako positions now in preparation for a May 14 proposal deadline and formal negotiations July 6–8. To minimize further damage and enable an effective intersessional ICCAT agreement to protect North Atlantic shortfin makos, Parties (most importantly the EU and US) need to be convinced to:

- Publicly support (ideally cosponsor) and promote the science-based mako limits championed by Canada, Senegal, and others in previous ICCAT meetings
- Prepare to adopt a national ban on landings and trade, and
- Encourage other ICCAT Parties to do the same.

What about the broader context? The harmonization of complementary, science-based safeguards across fisheries and environment authorities at domestic and international levels is not only essential for saving makos but can set a critical example for conserving many other shark and ray species.

What's the situation in a nutshell? North Atlantic shortfin makos are in dangerous decline due to overfishing by multiple countries. Continued landings from the endangered population:

- Run counter to scientific advice for a non-retention policy "without exception"
- Create incentive for irresponsible fishing practices that cause stress and ensure mortality, and
- Further delay a multidecadal recovery.

The North Atlantic shortfin mako retention ban advised by ICCAT scientists:

- Is based on scenarios that incorporate all sources of mortality, including dead discards
- Is deemed the *most effective* way to achieve the substantial reductions necessary
- Takes into account the species' relatively high post-release survival, and
- Is vital to remove incentives to encounter and kill this valuable, threatened species.

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