IUCN Shark Specialist Group – Statement on Finning

The IUCN Shark Specialist Group considers that shark finning (the removal and retention of shark fins and the discard at sea of the rest of the carcass) threatens many shark stocks, the stability of marine ecosystems, sustainable traditional fisheries, food security and socio-economically important recreational fisheries. It is, therefore, contrary to the principles of the UN FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries (Article 7.2.2 (g)) and to the guiding principles, objective and aims of the UN FAO International Plan for the Conservation and Management of Sharks (IPOA-Sharks).

1. Trade and landings data indicate that finning activity is widespread, largely unmanaged and unmonitored. Because of the biological characteristics of sharks, it also leads to unsustainable levels of mortality.

2. Finning and discarding of shark bodies is wasteful of protein and other potential products derived from sharks (it utilises only 2-5% of the shark, throwing the remainder away). This wastage prevents socio-economic benefits from accruing when other shark products are processed on shore and is a threat to food security (the latter particularly when undertaken by distant water fleets in the waters of developing countries).

3. Finning causes the death of tens of millions of sharks. This potentially threatens the survival of rare and vulnerable species and, by removing large numbers of top predators from the oceanic ecosystem, may have dramatic and undesirable ecological impacts that could potentially threaten yields of other commercial species.

4. Finning impedes the collection of the species-specific scientific data that are essential for monitoring catches and landings and implementing sustainable shark fisheries management (as required under international agreements and statutes).

We consider, therefore, that a ban on shark finning is justified throughout the world's oceans and high seas. We also urge States that take sharks in target or bycatch fisheries to implement fully the UN FAO IPOA-Sharks by developing National and Regional Plans of Action that incorporate the guiding principles of a precautionary approach and recognize the nutritional and socio-economic importance of shark catches in some regions, and that minimise waste and discards from shark catches and promote their full use through, *inter alia*, implementing finning bans. Such bans should require sharks to be landed with fins attached. Or, if this is not possible, all parts should be landed together at a ratio that should not exceed 5% of fin to dressed carcass weight.

Please contact us if you would like more information.

Finning by international fleets

Most nations do not keep accurate records of the quantities of shark fins taken, landed or exported due to either lack of definition in fisheries statistics or customs categories compiled and/or lack of auditing and enforcement of reporting requirements. In most cases the shark landings data available represent primarily whole sharks (or headed and gutted sharks).

Hong Kong handles at least 50% and perhaps as much as 80% of the world trade in shark fin. The Hong Kong Government Census and Statistics Department maintains detailed records of unprocessed and processed shark fin imports (recorded as weight and value of frozen/salted and dried fin) by country of origin and country of consignment. These records show that in recent years imports of unprocessed shark fins from Europe, Taiwan, Indonesia, Singapore, United Arab Emirates, USA, Yemen, India, Japan, and Mexico have dominated the Hong Kong market.

An initial comparison of some national shark landings data and Hong Kong fin import data from these countries indicate a significant mismatch (based on widely-employed fin to body ratios for shark carcasses). The conclusion we draw is that the fins of tens of millions of sharks 'missing' from

the landings data of many nations are appearing in Hong Kong. Some of this mismatch may be due to under-reporting of shark landings, but observer data from high seas fisheries and reports of fin fisheries in some developing countries indicate that many millions of sharks are being finned and discarded at sea. This finning takes place because fins are extremely valuable (one of the most expensive seafood products). They also take up little space, and are easy to store on board for long periods of time. Conversely, the meat of many species of sharks is of lower value than that of other target species such as billfish and tuna, more difficult to process, and high in ammonia which can taint the higher value components of the fish catch.

The Hong Kong data do not provide a full picture of the extent of shark finning undertaken by fishing vessels. There are likely to be significant exports to other shark fin trade centres, including Singapore and Taiwan, for which import data have not been analysed. There are reports of fins being trans-shipped at sea from vessels of distant water fleets to East Asian vessels, and of the direct purchase of fins from a distant water fleet by a fin trader from an East Asian state. Fins traded in this way will often not be recorded as supplied by vessels registered in other states, if reported at all.

Hong Kong trade data indicate that imports of fins rose significantly at the end of the 1980s, from 2739 mt in 1980 to over 3000 mt in 1987 and 4000 mt in 1992. Imports are currently continuing to grow at 6% per annum. Before this time, most sharks caught incidentally in long line fisheries (probably the largest source of fins) were an unwanted bycatch. Fishermen tried to minimise incidental hooking rates and sharks were generally released alive (over 80% of sharks taken in pelagic hook and line fisheries around Hawaii were alive when brought on board for finning). The increased demand for shark fins combined with depletion of stocks of traditional target species (e.g. tuna and swordfish) transformed sharks from a largely unwanted bycatch into a valuable target species within ten years.

The international fisheries management context

International concerns over the sustainability of shark fisheries and the international fin trade increased significantly in the early 1990s. In 1994, the 9th Conference of Parties (CoP) to CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species) adopted a Resolution on 'The Status of International Trade in Shark Species'. This called for reviews of information on the biological status of sharks and effects of international trade and requested FAO and other international fisheries organisations to improve their research programmes. Sharks have been discussed at every CITES Conference since, with the 12th CoP in 2002 agreeing a new Shark Resolution that will continue CITES' involvement in shark conservation and management issues for the foreseeable future. The concern expressed by the Parties to CITES over the potential management problems caused by international fin trade has also resulted in several shark fisheries management initiatives.

The FAO International Plan of Action (IPOA) for the Conservation and Management of Sharks, elaborated within the framework of the Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries and adopted in 1999, recognises that increasing levels of shark catches (in target, multi-species and bycatch fisheries) are now posing a threat to several species of sharks. Shark fishing states are asked to implement the IPOA-Sharks by adopting national plans of action for the conservation and management of shark stocks. These plans should aim to, inter alia, 'ensure that shark catches are sustainable', 'minimise waste and discards (for example requiring the retention of sharks from which fins are removed)', and 'encourage full use of dead sharks'. Other principles and recommendations of the IPOA-Sharks regarding food security, collection of species-specific biological, catch, landings and trade data, and implementation of harvesting strategies for shared stocks also require implicitly that finning be prohibited and sharks landed whole. A copy of the IPOA- may be downloaded from the FAO website.

The practice of shark finning has received considerable attention over the past decade, with several major shark-fishing states (including Brazil, South Africa, USA, Oman, most Australian states and federal waters, and Costa Rica) having implemented a ban on the retention of fins without shark bodies. In some cases the ban has actively been promoted by the fishing industry (which

implemented a voluntary ban in Australia prior to legislation). These states are now urging others to do the same, particularly in view of the high numbers of transboundary, straddling, highly migratory and high seas stocks of sharks exploited by two or more states. For example, some shark species are known to migrate between the eastern and western North Atlantic and the North and South Atlantic. The UN Agreement on Straddling Fish Stocks and Highly Migratory Fish Stocks, aimed at the conservation and management of high seas fish stocks, calls for Parties to provide accurate reporting of, and minimise, bycatch and discards, and to gather reliable comprehensive scientific data as the basis for management (amongst other issues). This Agreement mandates a precautionary approach to the management of species and defines several oceanic sharks as 'highly migratory'. Other species qualify as 'straddling stocks'.

The majority of nations have had a poor initial response to the IPOA-Sharks as evidenced at COFI in February 2001 and by CITES' review of progress in 2002. Most have not produced a Plan of Action. Those that have do not adequately address the issues raised in the IPOA, and do not propose sufficient actions to begin the process of delivering precautionary, sustainable shark fisheries management. An international ban on shark finning would be a simple and wholly justifiable step towards implementation of the IPOA. It would enable managers to improve the quality of shark fisheries monitoring and associated scientific research, and hence the quality of advice on which to base sustainable management.

In accordance with the FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries, states should minimize wastes and discards from sharks. The practice of finning clearly goes against this requirement.

The case for a finning ban

Scientific and management considerations: The provision of effective fisheries management advice requires a sound scientific understanding of fish stocks. Such an understanding is underpinned by species-specific (and ideally stock-specific) biological, catch, discard and landings data. These data can only be obtained if accurate records are made at species level. Shark finning discourages the collection of species-specific data. Not only is the extent of finning and the quantities of fins retained obviously not recorded effectively, but also it is extremely hard to identify many species of sharks either from their fins alone, or from the 'trunks' of bodies landed without fins and heads. The practice of finning therefore impedes the collation of accurate scientific data and the provision of essential management advice.

Sustainability: All unregulated shark fisheries for which catch or landings data exist have been unsustainable. Economically important target shark fisheries that have crashed after a short period of high landings include those for porbeagle sharks in Europe and off Eastern Canada, spiny dogfish in Europe, basking sharks in Europe, soupfin sharks off California, common thresher sharks off California, and several species of skate. Some of these species are now listed on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. These fisheries were unsustainable because of the low reproductive capacity of sharks (a result of slow growth, late maturity and small numbers of pups produced after a long pregnancy), close stock-recruitment relationship, and long recovery time after depletion. Shark fin fisheries are even more likely to be unsustainable because they do not discriminate between the species, size or maturity of the sharks targeted, and are not limited by the catching and handling capacity of participating vessels or by operating constraints (they often form part of a mixed species fishery that is supported by more fecund teleosts and therefore likely to continue indefinitely).

Socio-economics: Although there is a long history of unsustainable shark fisheries, certain artisanal fisheries appear to be sustainable and are of high socio-economic value. Recreational shark fisheries have a particularly high economic value and are becoming increasingly sustainable as they move towards catch and release of target species. Both of the above fisheries are threatened by stock declines driven by finning. Finning and discard of shark bodies also prevents the processing and sale of meat and other products in markets, thus bypassing the socio-economic benefits and added value that these activities bring. Fins are usually exported in unprocessed form: all benefits derived from processing and resale accrue outside the country of origin (the processed shark fin on sale in

countries outside of East Asia have in fact been processed in East Asia and re-imported).

Food security: The traditional, artisanal shark fisheries undertaken by some coastal fishing communities in low-income countries provide a vital source of protein for food-deficient regions. Such fisheries have been operating for many decades and, therefore, appear to have been sustainable. Unfortunately, unregulated industrial-scale shark fisheries (sometimes operating in coastal waters under bilateral agreements with developed countries) increasingly threaten such fisheries and food security in the region. Distant water fleets are particularly likely to undertake shark finning because of the ease with which shark fins may be stored for long periods.

Environmental considerations: Finning, resulting in the unregulated and unrestricted removal of sharks from the marine ecosystem, is of environmental concern for two main reasons. Firstly, while some sharks are relatively abundant and globally distributed, others are naturally scarce and of high conservation concern. The latter will continue to be removed in small, unreported quantities along with more abundant species and could be driven to very low numbers (potentially even to extinction) by continued finning activity. Secondly, top predators are known frequently to have a keystone role in their ecosystem. Changes in abundance or the removal of top predators is likely to result in unforeseen and unpredictable changes to the rest of the ecosystem. The role of sharks as top predators has been studied with the use of an ecosystem model, with interesting conclusions. For example, removal of tiger sharks from a tropical ecosystem resulted in a decline in numbers of some important commercial fish species, even though the latter were preyed upon by sharks and might therefore have been expected to increase in abundance following loss of sharks from the ecosystem. (This was because the sharks kept populations of other predators of these fishes in check.)

Implementation of a finning ban

Two main forms of finning ban are in general use. The simplest requires that shark carcasses be landed with fins attached. Possessing detached fins on board vessels is an offence. This form of regulation is simple, enforceable and enables maximum extraction of scientific data from landings. It also maximises fin and carcass quality and value and is therefore preferred by some shark fishers and processors (e.g. in certain Australian states). Where sharks are to be frozen on board, however, it may be necessary to remove fins. In such cases a ratio must be adopted that is relevant for the species captured and which maximises value and quality of both fins and carcasses (by minimising quantities of meat left attached to fins). Ratios of 2.5% fin:live (whole body) weight and 5% fin:dressed carcass (headed and gutted) weight were developed under commercial fishing conditions in the US Atlantic for sandbar shark Carcharhinus plumbeus, and 2% and 4% (respectively) for blue shark Prionace glauca. These ratios are generous for most other commercial species. If a permitted ratio of fins and carcasses is set, this can realistically only be enforced by requiring simultaneous landings of both products so that their weights can be compared.

Arguments opposing a finning ban

The economic value of shark fins to some fishing fleets and the 'cost' of introducing and enforcing new fisheries regulations are disincentives for the introduction of a shark finning ban. Arguments used in opposition of a ban include the economic disadvantage to fleets unable to fin sharks, the difficulty of enforcing fisheries regulations, and concern that a ban would increase discard rates (after all, 4-5% of the animal is utilised following finning). Similar arguments have been made in respect of many proposals for improved fisheries management which have since successfully been adopted. They were also voiced during the consultations with FAO states prior to the agreement of the IPOA-Sharks, and have been promoted by various interest groups prior to the national bans on finning introduced by states listed in paragraph 8. All fisheries agreements have costs and benefits. The arguments for a ban on finning summarised above greatly exceed the disadvantages of such a regulation.