

EcoAméricas
Centerpiece
November, 2003

Sharks pay price as fin trade prospers

Costa Rica, a key landing and export point in the lucrative shark-fin trade, is faulted for ignoring fishing practices believed to be threatening the world's shark populations

Manuel Silva is no hard-line enforcer spoiling for a fight with powerful fishing interests. But last May, the quiet young Costa Rican Coast Guard official set off a furor by reporting a Taiwanese fishing vessel's late-night landing of some 30 tons of shark fins on a private dock in this Pacific port town.

In theory, Costa Rica does not countenance shark finning—the practice of catching sharks, cutting off their valuable fins and then dumping them back into the ocean to die. Yet the landing Silva observed, like many others by foreign fishing vessels here, was not scrutinized by any of the four agencies charged with checking incoming cargos. In fact, the agency Silva contacted—the Costa Rican Fishing Institute (Incopescas)—failed to follow up even after receiving his report.

Local environmental groups did learn about the shark-fin cargo, however. They denounced it publicly and the local media weighed in, investigating allegations of lax enforcement, corruption and illegal fishing practices in the lucrative trade that serves Asia's burgeoning shark-fin market.

The resulting coverage has embarrassed Abel Pacheco, Costa Rica's self-described environmentalist president, and his Taiwanese counterpart, Chen Shui-Bian, and prompted green groups to intensify campaigning for a crackdown on shark finning. It also has highlighted this country's role as a key processing and export point for shark fins landed by hundreds of Costa Rican and foreign vessels working in nearby international waters.

“Costa Rica has become intricately linked to this trade for two reasons: it has the biggest [longliner] fleet in the hemisphere, and it allows international vessels dedicated to the exploitation and trade of shark fins to land here,” says biologist Jorge Ballesteros of the Costa Rican Sea Turtle Restoration Project (Pretoma), a project of the nonprofit Turtle Island Restoration Network of Forest Knolls, California. “While there are no clear statistics

on how many sharks are killed, we are almost certain that the trade is causing a serious imbalance in marine ecosystems.”

According to the World Conservation Union (IUCN), tens of millions of sharks are finned and dis-carded at sea every year. Because sharks are slow to breed and mature, heavy fishing of them is believed to be driving down their numbers dramati-cally— a problem that could have ecologically damaging repercussions further down the marine food chain.

Studies show populations of northwest Atlantic coastal and oceanic shark have dropped by an average of 70% in the last 15 years. While similar studies are lacking for eastern Pacific populations, experts believe that unless shark kills are greatly reduced in the region, some shark species could collapse within the next decade.

“Finning doesn’t distinguish sharks by species, age or size,” says Randall Arauz, Pretoma’s president. “The most fragile and less abundant [shark] species continue being captured incidentally. Because of this, they could reach extremely low [popula-tion] levels or extinction.”

Yet experts agree there is a scarcity of reliable information on shark catches and populations.

The Costa Rican Foreign Trade Promotion Office (Procomer) keeps export figures only on whole-shark exports. This and the fact that fins and shark meat go to different markets make it hard to estimate how many sharks are killed. Incopesca fin-export statistics, meanwhile, are lumped together with other “dry-fish” categories.

And Costa Rica has undertaken little shark research—even though it has become one of the hemisphere’s most important participants in the shark-fin trade.

“One of our biggest problems is the lack of information about shark species,” says Moisés Mug-Villanueva, who oversees Latin American and Caribbean fisheries issues for the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and serves on the board of direc-tors of Costa Rica’s professional Biologists Association. “When it comes to reporting catches, everything is lumped together—coastal species, oceanic species—regardless of sex and age.”

Despite the dearth of data, shark fishing clearly has intensified dramatically in recent decades. Experts say that during the 1970s, local and reef fishing strained coastal shark populations throughout the Americas. This forced vessels to fish further out to sea and to use long-line technology, which greatly improved catch volumes during the 1980s.

In 1982, Costa Rica’s National Learning Institute began helping to modernize the country’s fishing fleet, using technical support and financing from the Taiwanese government, according to Pretoma. Though longliners fish for a variety of species, shark—and shark fins in particular—have become an increasingly attractive component of their catch.

In Asia, shark fins are used in cakes, cookies, bread and even cat food. But the most important force driving demand for them is Asia’s growing taste for shark-fin soup, which

can cost \$60 or more in restaurants and often is served at weddings, birth-days and other special occasions.

“To many Chinese in modern societies, to be able to consume shark fins reflects their social position and status,” says Victor Wu, an activist in Singapore affiliated with the San Francisco, California-based environmental group WildAid.

As demand for shark fins increased in Asia during the late 1980s, so did Costa Rica’s role in ensuring a steady supply. By the end of the 1990s, Costa Rica had become a major cargo-unloading point for international fleets. Exports—mainly of tuna, but also of shark fins—grew.

Yet Costa Rican government regulation of the burgeoning landing and export operations did not. Observes Mug-Villanueva: “Frankly, regarding the issues of fishing licenses, control, oversight and management [of the fishing industry] here, there is much to be done.”

Conservationists see a direct link between galloping shark-fin demand and dwindling shark populations worldwide. “There is no doubt shark finning is one of the most important causes of the global reduction in shark populations,” says Pretoma’s Arauz. “The fin trade has grown so lucrative that now it not only affects incidental catches, but sharks are actually hooked exclusively for their fins.”

Contributing to the outcry against shark finning is video footage obtained by environmental groups showing sharks being taken aboard long-line fishing vessels in the eastern Pacific, shorn of their fins and then dumped, still alive, back into the sea. Shark meat fetches lower prices than fins, so large sharks often are tossed overboard to save storage space.

Speaking to a Costa Rican television reporter, his face covered to protect his identity, one Puntarenas-based fisherman said recently: “Because shark meat brings such a low price and what matters are the fins, we always cut the fins and throw the body into the water.”

Said a second fisherman: “On the boat where I worked, we always did it. Every boat does.”

On paper, Costa Rica’s regulatory approach in the past several years has been to discourage shark finning without shutting down the trade in fins taken from legally landed sharks.

In 2001, Incopescas issued a decree prohibiting the landing of shark fins unless they were still attached to the shark’s body, a measure intended to prevent the wholesale slaughter of sharks at sea by reducing the number of fins a vessel could bring to market in a single voyage. Once at the dock, the fins could be cut from the carcass and sold.

As of Nov. 3, that measure was replaced by a new regulation that grew out of an agreement Incopescas drafted with the Biologists Association. The new regulation stipulates that vessels are allowed to land shark fins amounting to 7% to 12.7% of the total weight of shark on board.

Supporters of the provision say the weight requirement achieves the same objective as the previous rule. At the same time, they argue, it responds to fishing-industry complaints that fin quality suffers when fins can't be cut from shark carcasses before being frozen in a vessel's hold.

The new regulation also calls for private biologists to supplement Incopecsa inspections by supervising the unloading of fishing vessels after business hours and on weekends.

Some green advocates say the measure overstates the share that fins represent of a shark's total body weight and—by dispensing with the requirement that fins be attached—creates new opportunities for evasion.

But others call the new regulation an improvement. “The slaughter of sharks has been indiscriminate,” says Biologists Association President Noemi Canet. “The [agreement's] purpose is to try to regulate and control the situation, because Incopecsa has lost control.”

Asserts WWF's Mug-Villanueva, who helped draft the agreement: “Costa Rica is on the verge of taking a very important first step in addressing the problem.”

Concern about shark finning also has fueled interest in other measures. For instance, Pretoma has gathered 20,000 signatures in support of a petition calling for the suspension of landing permits for foreign fishing vessels until enforcement is improved. The petition also calls for on-board and dockside monitoring, a marine-conservation initiative and approval of a long-pending fishing-reform bill.

That reform bill has been stalled in Costa Rica's Congress for six years—thanks in large part, environmental advocates claim, to pressure from the fishing industry. The legislation, which would eclipse the current regulation, calls for prison terms of up to two years for any-one involved in the trafficking of fins that have been cut from sharks' bodies before the catch has reached the dock.

In the wake of the recent finning disclosures, the legislation appears to be getting high-level support. Asked about shark finning, President Pacheco termed the practice “disgraceful” and urged quick passage of the pending fishing-reform legislation.

Whatever Costa Rica's regulatory intentions on paper, however, little progress will be made without effective enforcement in practice. Thus far, enforcement has been anemic.

An enforcement void

Many vessels unloading shark fins in Puntarenas—where 95% of Costa Rica's Pacific catches are landed—are owned by Taiwanese and Indonesian companies that have built their own private docks. Some Costa Rican companies operate private docks here, too.

Contacts

Randall Arauz

President
Costa Rican Sea Turtle
Restoration Project (Pretoma)
San José, Costa Rica
Tel: +(506) 241-5227
Fax: +(506) 236-6017
raraudz@tortugamarina.org
www.tortugamarina.org

Noemi Canet

President
Costa Rican Association of
Professional Biologists
San José, Costa Rica
Tel/Fax: +(506) 221-9886
biologos@racsa.co.cr
www.colegiodebiologos.20m.com

Ligia Castro

President
Costa Rican National
Fishing Institute (Incopescas)
Puntarenas, Costa Rica
Tel: +(506) 661-0846
Fax: +(506) 661-2855
lmcastrou@yahoo.com

Moisés Mug-Villanueva

Chief Fisheries Officer
for Latin America
and the Caribbean
World Wide Fund for Nature
San José, Costa Rica
Tel: +(506) 253-4960
Fax: +(506) 253-4927
moisesmug@wwfca.org
www.wwfca.org

Victor Wu

Shark Conservation Program
WildAid
Singapore
Tel: +(65) 9696-6373
Fax: +(65) 6343-5345
victorwu@singnet.com.sg

Documents & Resources

For more information on the
shark-fin trade, visit IUCN's
Shark Specialist Group site:

www.flmnh.ufl.edu/fish/Organizations/SSG/finning.htm

Environmentalists charge fins often are hidden under tuna and other legally caught fish in case there's an inspection. They say the fins are trucked to the San José area, where they're processed and dried, then exported by plane— typically to Hong Kong.

Vessels with unreported, illegally obtained shark fins face little risk of being found out. Dockside inspections are infrequent and, if they occur, likely to be cursory. In the port of Puntarenas, Incopesca has only three inspectors to oversee landings by hundreds of boats on dozens of private docks.

In a March 3 letter to Pretoma's Arauz, Incopesca President Ligia Castro claimed Incopesca inspectors check "the majority of boats" landing in Puntarenas. She later admitted inspectors only check when asked by the boat owner. The chief of Incopesca's Puntarenas inspectors, Ana Salas, says the agency examines cargos of only 20% of the 30 to 50 foreign vessels unloading in the port every month.

Other agencies besides Incopesca must theoretically keep an eye on the cargos of foreign-owned ships—the Agriculture Ministry and the Customs Office, for instance—but none do so on a regular basis.

Plethora of private docks

Cargos aren't the only thing escaping official scrutiny. When asked for a list of authorized private docks for fishing vessels in Puntarenas, neither Incopesca nor the Public Works and Transport Ministry (Mopt) could furnish one.

Former Port Captain Marvin Jaén—on a six-month unpaid leave of absence amidst allegations of corruption—did provide a partial list of eight private docks apparently authorized by administrative decree. But Jaén's boss, Jorge Hernández, the sub-director of Mopt's Office of Maritime and Port Security, later acknowledge no private docks have operating permits.

And to date, no full-scale government investigation has been made into longstanding allegations of tax evasion, fraud and corruption in the port of Puntarenas.

Yet there nevertheless are hints that the recent outcry in Costa Rica might be having some effect. Pacheco, who takes pride in his environmental stands against oil drilling and open-pit mining, appears anxious to be seen addressing the shark-fin problem.

And Incopesca's adoption of the new fishing regulation that took effect this month demonstrates that the agency clearly feels it is under pressure to tighten inspections.

Whether these signals presage sustained improvement in Costa Rica's policing of the shark-fin trade, however, remains to be seen.

Fishing crews appear to be hedging their bets. Industry observers say some vessels have been electing not to land shark fins in Costa Rica, unloading them in El Salvador instead.

Meanwhile, Costa Rican environmentalists report they've been contacted by El Salvador's fishing agency for information on the finning problem and the possible responses to it.

—**David Boddiger**

November 2003

Ecoamericas