

Effectiveness of hammerhead measure questioned

San José, Costa Rica

Environmental groups say a moratorium in Costa Rica on the export of hammerhead sharks has done little to cut down on fishing of the species.

About eight metric tons of hammerhead shark fins have been landed during the moratorium, according to Fins Attached, an international nonprofit fighting the lucrative trade in shark fins. The fins have likely been freeze-dried in the expectation they can be sold once the moratorium is lifted.

News of the continued landing of hammerheads comes against a backdrop of debate in Costa Rica about the 2013 inclusion of hammerhead sharks in Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (Cites). Products from species listed on Appendix II only can be exported from a Cites signatory country if a scientific council of that country studies the matter and issues a “non-detrimental finding” that commercialization will not damage the species.

It's all about fins

In Costa Rica and other Central American countries, fishermen prize sharks not for their meat, which sells at low prices in local markets, but for their fins, which are exported to Asia as an ingredient in delicacies such as shark-fin soup. Though fins usually account for less than 5% of the animal's weight, they fetch hundreds of dollars a pound. As Asian demand for shark fins grew in recent decades, fishermen began slicing off sharks' fins and throwing the carcasses overboard so they could store more fins in their boats' holds. Shark finning, as the practice is known, has caused massive declines in shark populations in the Eastern Tropical Pacific.

Conservation groups estimate that shark populations in Costa Rican waters declined by as much as 60% during 1991-2001. Sharks often are caught on longlines, heavy fishing gear that features a main line extending for miles, with shorter lines attached to it that carry baited hooks placed at intervals. Criticized by marine conservationists as a destructively indiscriminate means of fishing, longlines can ensnare sharks, sea turtles and marine mammals in addition to the fish species ostensibly being targeted.

In 2010, then-President Laura Chinchilla promised to crack down on finning. She passed an all-out ban on the practice and required boats to put in at public docks where their catches would be registered to ensure sharks were landed with their fins naturally attached. These decisions established Costa Rica as a leader in shark conservation in the region, and in 2013 Costa Rica's delegation to Cites led the charge in getting hammerheads included in Appendix II.

When that measure passed, Costa Rica

helped push for a quick 18-month period for Cites member states to issue a non-detrimental finding (NDF) or spell out steps they would take to protect the species. After Luis Guillermo Solís became president in 2014, the country continued its support for hammerhead protection at the international level but did little to regulate hammerhead exports at home. In November 2014, two months past the Cites deadline, the government had still not done the studies needed to weigh the possibility of an NDF.

When exporters that month requested permits to ship the fins of two hammerhead species, officials from the Costa Rican Fisheries Institute (Incopescas) got the shipments approved anyway by the National System of Conservation Areas (Sinac), which locally has final say in export matters under Cites.

Government logic questioned

In February of 2015, when another shipment was approved, environmental activists began to protest. Government officials argued that since the sharks were already dead, it would be worse to let them go to waste, a stance that environmental groups warned would simply allow fishing companies to continue capturing hammerheads and storing the fins until they found a legal window to export them.

Despite protests, the government allowed the shipment, then declared a moratorium that would be in effect until the NDF studies could be completed. Once those studies were done, the local Cites scientific council, known as Crac-Cites, recommended in August 2015 that the export of hammerhead fins be prohibited and the moratorium be extended indefinitely.

But a year later, in August 2016, exporter Smalley Development requested a permit to export 690 kilos of hammerhead fins. Crac-Cites is considering the matter. Extrapolating from averages gathered from the inspection logs that record the species landed at public docks, as many as 8,000 hammerheads could have been killed during the moratorium in 2015 and 2016.

“The whole point of Cites is to reduce the mortality for these species by reducing international demand,” says Randall Arauz of Fins Attached. “If Costa Rica does allow these fins to be exported it will be a manual for people around the world on how to get around Cites with loopholes.”

And Arauz says that even if export of the fins is allowed, sharks will continue to die without stricter restrictions on long line fishing. Environmentalists and international fishing experts say a three-month long line ban during breeding season would greatly reduce shark mortality.

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