Progress Toward a Stronger Shark Finning Ban at NAFO
EU-US initiative gains support from Cuba and Norway before being stalled by Canada, Japan, Korea

Halifax, Nova Scotia. September 25, 2015. An effort by the European Union and the United States to better prevent shark “finning” (slicing off a shark’s fins and discarding the body at sea) gained support from Cuba and Norway during this week’s annual meeting of the Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organization (NAFO). The EU and US have repeatedly proposed that NAFO and other international fisheries bodies strengthen existing finning bans by prohibiting the removal of shark fins at sea. In the end, however, lack of support from Canada, Japan, and Korea led to the proposal’s defeat.

“Banning at-sea removal of shark fins and thereby requiring that sharks be landed with their fins still naturally attached is widely recognized as the most reliable method for preventing shark finning,” said Sonja Fordham of Shark Advocates International. “We are extremely pleased that this week Cuba and Norway joined the growing chorus of countries calling for adoption of this best practice as a cornerstone of responsible shark fisheries management.”

NAFO banned shark finning in 2005, but allows shark fins to be removed at sea and stored separately from shark carcasses onboard, as long as the fin-to-carcass weight ratio does not exceed 5%. Using ratios to enforce finning bans has proved complicated and difficult, but ratios remain on the books in countries like Canada and Japan. The EU replaced its ratio limit with a complete ban on at-sea shark fin removal in 2013.

“We are deeply grateful for EU leadership in promoting fins-attached rules worldwide,” said Ali Hood of the UK-based Shark Trust. “We urge expanded efforts to demonstrate the method’s success and continued work to increase the number of countries co-sponsoring these important initiatives in international fishery arenas.”

Conservation groups are expecting that a multi-national proposal for an international ban on at-sea shark fin removal will again be debated at the November meeting of the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) in Malta.

“We now look to the ICCAT meeting for continuing to build the global momentum toward stronger finning bans,” added Ania Budziak of Project AWARE. “We are hopeful that growing support from various constituent groups, including increasingly engaged divers, over the coming months will help ensure additional progress toward safeguarding sharks.”

Cuba will host the 2016 NAFO annual meeting next September. There, in addition to likely again debating finning of sharks, parties will set quotas for closely related skates. The main target of the region’s skate fisheries, the thorny or starry skate (Amblyraja radiata), is listed by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) as threatened. The NAFO skate quota is currently higher than the level advised by scientists.

NAFO Contracting Parties include Canada, Cuba, Denmark (in respect to the Faroe Islands & Greenland), the European Union, France (in respect to Saint Pierre et Miquelon), Iceland, Japan, Republic of Korea, Norway, Russian Federation, Ukraine, and the US. NAFO Parties develop international management measures for Northwest Atlantic fish (except salmon, tunas/marlins, and sedentary species).