

Favoring the international fleet

By Randall Arauz, President of PRETOMA

I read, filled with frustration, the declarations of the President of INCOPECSA before the Environmental Commission of the Legislative Assembly on February 14, in which he states that the organization has its hands tied to fight shark finning in national waters, and requests millions to contract more employees and put greater controls in place.

To begin with, shark finning is not a problem in national waters. Though the practice may have been common in the past, national fishermen have shown their willingness to respect the current laws that require sharks to be landed with all fins naturally attached to the body. This simple method has served as a model for other nations in the region, and even the United Nations General Assembly recently recommended its implementation to effectively control shark finning on a global scale.

Though additional resources would be helpful, the problem of shark finning has more to do with the political desire to arbitrarily favor the interests of the foreign fleet, which operates in international waters, than with the lack of resources.

Without regulation or control

As is widely recognized, shark finning is practiced by fishing vessels under foreign flags, mostly originating from Asia. They have a tremendous impact, and have been denounced in international forums for shark finning and illegal fishing without regulation or control. Since 1998, Costa Rica has allowed this fleet to land its cargo of shark fins on the private docks of Puntarenas without any type of legal restraint. Despite laws passed by Customs and the Ministry of Public Works and Transportation that require this fleet to use public docks, as well as orders by the Constitutional Court and the Ministry of Finance to use public infrastructure as a condition for docking in Costa Rica, the fisheries authorities and customs officials have turned a blind eye to these practices. PRETOMA's experience in this topic, which spans three presidential administrations, shows that the fisheries authorities have created more work, and spent more resources, in trying to evade the law on behalf of the international fleet than if they had simply complied with it in the first place.

We could learn from El Salvador. For over a year, not a single foreign vessel has landed its cargo in the country, thanks to the effective application of laws against shark finning. In the same amount of time, 90 foreign vessels landed in Costa Rica, taking advantage of the legal loophole that the country offers through its private docks.

Comply with the law!

In closing, what Costa Rica needs to do in order to promote the conservation and management of sharks is, before anything else, to comply with the law in these private docks. What worth will more inspectors have if the law is optional for the international fleet?

It should also be recognized that sharks need more than a simple stop to shark finning. We must reduce their mortality. We must establish permanent and temporal prohibitions in zones of congregation, minimum sizes, maximum quotas, and prohibited take of certain species, all of which will require more technical information and the promotion of additional legislation in a regional and local context. Sadly, the protectionist attitude of our nation toward the international fleet not only sentences any

domestic control to absolute failure, but also any initiative to promote the regional management of sharks.