

Project Profile: Research, Conservation, and Management of Sharks in Costa Rica

THE PROBLEM

As has happened around the rest of the planet, shark populations in Costa Rica have drastically diminished during the last decade because of over fishing. An industrial fishing fleet, composed of vessels whose vague registry is complicated by the practice of flying flags of convenience, coerces the Western Tropical Pacific's waters, "finning" sharks to fuel the insatiable "shark fin soup" industry in Asia. Many of these vessels illegally land their catches at private docks in Puntarenas.

Sharks are specialized predators that have regulated marine ecological systems for hundreds of millions of years. Their elimination not only signifies the loss of a valuable fishing resource, but also a disruption to the entire well functioning marine ecosystem. Their conservation and management require updated scientific information, collaboration from the industrial fishing community, and, due to the migratory nature of many species, regional cooperation.

SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH

Since 1999, PRETOMA has worked with the artisan and semi-industrial fishing sectors to determine biological parameters for commercial shark catches and has recommended management actions as methods of mitigating the impacts of shark fishing and over fishing of other organisms. Recently, PRETOMA has focused its efforts toward the study of shark migration at Cocos Island and in the waters of the Exclusive Economic Zone, by using tracking, ultrasound, and satellite technology to track these animal's movements.

STRATEGIC LITIGATION

Since 2001, PRETOMA has influenced Costa Rican fishing politics with respect to responsible shark fishing. Our legislation now demands that sharks be landed with their fins naturally attached as the only mechanism to halt finning. This method's effective implementation required, on three occasions, the General Attorney's intervention as solicited by PRETOMA. As a result of a Law Suit filed by PRETOMA at Costa Rica's Supreme Court in January of 2006, foreign vessels flying flags of convenience are now required to use public installations to land their catch. This same order was seconded by the General Treasury Inspector's office in February,

2007. Regrettably , the competent authorities have refused to abide by the rulings.

PUBLIC EDUCATION AND ACTIVISM

Many of PRETOMA's achievements have been made possible thanks to the Costa Rican public's unwavering support. PRETOMA holds discussions at grade schools and high schools regarding marine problems, as well as keeps the public informed of its ongoing work through internet, press, radio, and TV mediums. Hundreds of thousands of letters from Costa Rican citizens and from around the world have been sent to politicians, each one serving as effective support tools for shark conservation.

ACTIVITIES, June, 2008-May, 2009

The time has come to promote shark management, something that not only implies shark finning control, but also mortality rate reduction. Increased knowledge regarding shark behavior is required to better define domestic management policies, along with the continuation of strategic legislative activities in order to assure compliance with national laws that pertain to sharks, and the promotion of regional and international collaboration for shark management.

Research

- ? Evaluation of bull sharks and other populations of elasmobranchs in Guanacaste National Park
- ? Responsible artisanal fishing in the Caletas/Ario National Wildlife Refuge's Marine Protected Area
- ? Analysis of the commercial landing of elasmobranchs by artisanal and semi-industrial fishermen in Golfo Dulce, Costa Rica
- ? Shark migration in Cocos Island

Strategic Litigation

- ✍ Follow-up on illegal landings at private docks
- ✍ Law suits regarding fishing law violations submitted to the Attorney general
- ✍ Law suits against the illegal invasion of protected marine areas by fishermen

Public Education and Activism

- ? Shark talks in 30 rural communities
- ? Production and distribution of educational materials

? Billboards supporting shark conservation

International Policy

Global requirement to land shark fins attached to body

- ✍ United Nations
- ✍ Migratory Species Convention
- ✍ World Conservation Union
- ✍ Inter American Tropical Tuna Convention