

Proposal #42

Silky shark (*Carcharhinus falciformis*)

Proposed action

Include the silky shark (*Carcharhinus falciformis*) in CITES Appendix II.

Proponents

Bahamas, Bangladesh, Benin, Brazil, Burkina Faso, the Comoros, the Dominican Republic, Egypt, the European Union, Fiji, Gabon, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Maldives, Mauritania, Palau, Panama, Samoa, Senegal, Sri Lanka and Ukraine.



Silky Shark, Cuba. © Christian Viz/Wildscreen Exchange

Overview

The silky shark is a sleek, pelagic species found in tropical waters around the globe. This highly migratory, low productivity shark is at risk from substantial incidental take in high seas fisheries, exacerbated by demand for its meat and fins (which enter international trade). Despite some regional prohibitions, silky shark mortality is under-reported and largely unmanaged. Including the silky shark in CITES Appendix II could improve fisheries and trade data, bolster compliance with existing protections, complement existing commitments under the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS), and facilitate international cooperation toward more comprehensive national and regional conservation measures, thereby enhancing the chances for sustainable use.

Biology & Distribution

Characterized by relatively smooth skin, the silky shark is a tropical, migratory species found worldwide in coastal seas and the open ocean, at depths up to 500 meters, and often associated with seamounts.

Silky sharks make lengthy and regular migrations. The tendency of these high-order predators to associate with

schools of pelagic fish, such as tuna, makes them highly susceptible to incidental capture in fisheries.

Silky sharks are vulnerable to overfishing due to slow growth, late maturity (7–15 years for females), lengthy gestation (nine months to one year), and few young (four to 18 per litter). They can grow to more than three meters and live 20 years.

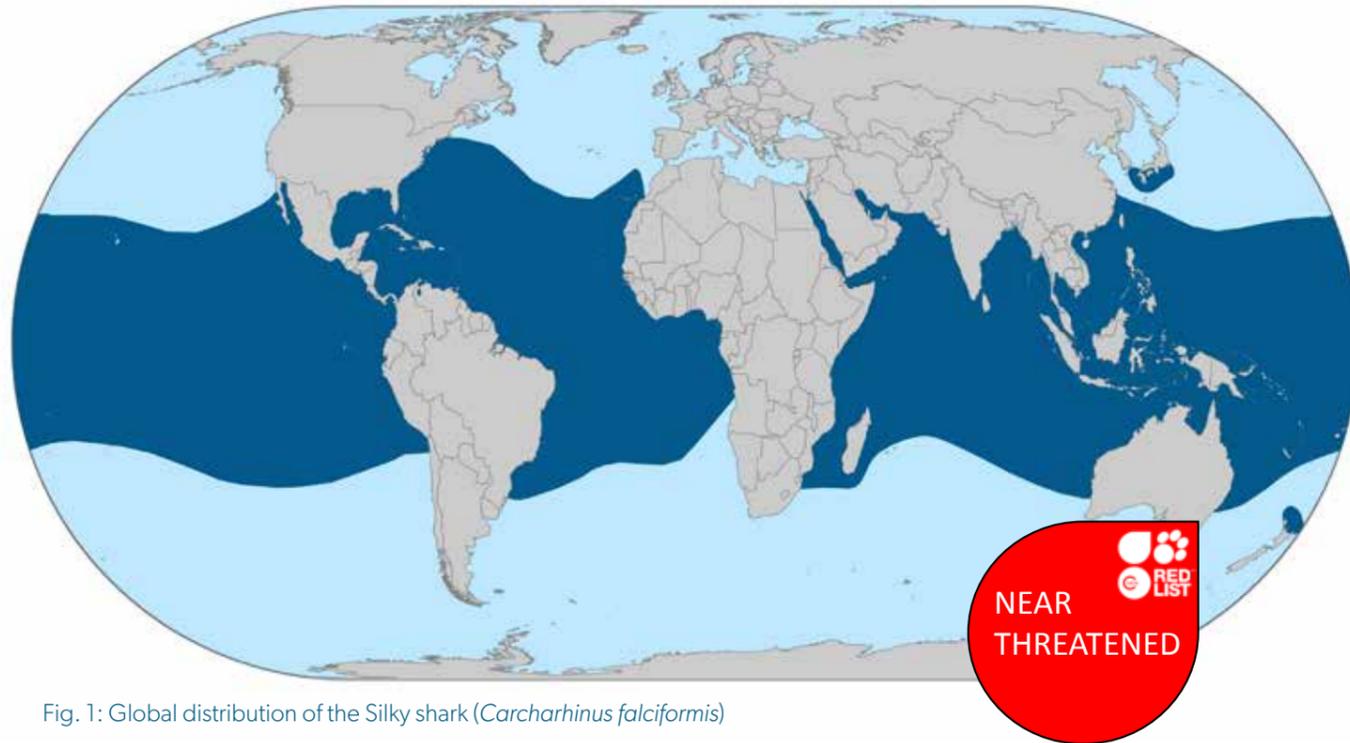


Fig. 1: Global distribution of the Silky shark (*Carcharhinus falciformis*)

Fisheries

Silky sharks are among the shark species most commonly captured in pelagic longline and purse seine gear set primarily for tunas; the associated mortality is the primary threat to silky shark populations. This species is also targeted in various coastal multispecies fisheries, particularly in the Indian Ocean and off Central America.

Silky sharks, particularly juveniles, tend to congregate around “fish aggregating devices” (FADs) used in purse seine fisheries, and may subsequently be entangled or caught incidentally. Post-release mortality in such cases is generally estimated to be high (~80%).

In recent years, Iran, Sri Lanka, Taiwan (Province of China), Ecuador, and Costa Rica have reported the highest levels of silky shark catch to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). Total reported global catches peaked at nearly 27,000t in 1999, and have fluctuated between ~7600t and ~2800t over the last decade, with just under 5000t reported in 2014.

Overall, silky shark mortality is considered under-reported. Many shark catches are not reported to the species level, and can go completely unrecorded in many countries. For reported silky shark catches, there is a general lack of information on size, weight, and sex.

International Trade

The fins of silky sharks enter the global trade driven by East Asian demand for shark fin soup (a Chinese celebratory dish). Silky shark fins are considered by traders to be of moderate value, and are sold under a broader category of fins (Wu Yang) that includes several other shark species.

A 2006 study of Hong Kong markets estimated that the fins of between 500,000 to 1.5 million silky sharks were entering international trade per year. A 2014 study, using different methods in Hong Kong fin markets, found silky sharks to be the second most important shark species by weight. Experts warn that key sampling and methodology differences make comparisons between these two studies problematic.

Whereas silky shark meat is usually consumed locally, landings from international waters would fall under CITES “introduction of the sea” provisions.

Other Uses

Silky sharks are commonly used for meat, particularly in Oman and Taiwan. Silky shark skin has been made into leather, and the livers used for oil. Silky sharks have been fished by recreational anglers in countries such as the US. Silky sharks are popular with divers and snorkelers in many places, including Cocos Island, Cabo San Lucas, the Florida Keys, and several parts of the Caribbean.

Population Status

The silky shark is classified as *Near Threatened* on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species™. Populations in the Eastern Central and Southeast Pacific, as well as the Northwest and Western Central Atlantic, are categorized as *Vulnerable*.

Under-reporting of catches hinders robust assessment of silky shark population status, but scientists associated with Regional Fishery Management Organizations (RFMOs) have been able to document declines in abundance. Most notably, analyses by Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission (IATTC) scientists indicate a 77% decline in catch per unit effort for the southern portion of the Eastern Pacific silky shark population between 1994 and 2013.

The silky shark has ranked high in terms of vulnerability to overfishing in Ecological Risk Assessments conducted by scientists affiliated with the International Commission for Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) and Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (IOTC).

Conservation Measures

Silky shark fishing limits for Eastern Pacific fisheries agreed in 2016 by IATTC fell far short of scientific advice. The IOTC has recognized the deteriorating status of silky sharks in the Indian Ocean, but has yet to adopt measures to safeguard the species. The Western and Central Pacific Fisheries

Commission (WCPFC) prohibits retention, transshipment, storage, and/or landing of silky sharks (parts or whole) caught in the Convention Area by the fisheries covered by the Convention. ICCAT bans the same activities, but allows exceptions for developing countries provided they report catch data, cap catches, and ensure fins are not traded internationally. While several ICCAT and WCPFC Parties, including the US and EU, have prohibited retention of silky sharks in pelagic fisheries accordingly, overall, evidence of compliance with and effectiveness of WCPFC and ICCAT silky shark measures is lacking.

There are few additional domestic fishing regulations specific to silky sharks. A number of silky shark range states, including Honduras, Bahamas, French Polynesia, Palau, Maldives, the Federated States of Micronesia, and the Marshall Islands, have banned commercial shark fishing and/or trade. Silky shark range states that have marine protected areas where shark fishing is banned include Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guinea-Bissau, and Mauritania. All of these conservation efforts would benefit from enhanced monitoring and complementary actions for adjacent waters through which silky sharks migrate.

Bans on shark finning (slicing off a shark’s fins and discarding the body at sea) have been adopted by the relevant RFMOs and scores of countries. These bans could reduce silky shark fishing mortality in cases where enforcement levels are high and interest in the species’ meat is low. Many finning ban enforcement standards, however, are weak, and demand for shark meat is generally on the rise.

The silky shark is listed on CMS Appendix II and covered under the CMS Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for Migratory Sharks. CMS Parties and MoU Signatories have thus committed to cooperate toward Silky shark conservation.

Expert Advice

The FAO expert advisory panel convened in 2016 to assess CITES proposals concerning commercially exploited aquatic species considered the silky shark as a “low productivity species” and determined that available information on status did not meet the Appendix II listing criteria. The panel found that, because only one data series (that for the southern Eastern Pacific Ocean) demonstrated a population decline that matched the listing criteria (if the most recent two years of data were not included), a CITES Appendix II listing would be “inconsistent with the proportionate risk to the species as a whole.” The panel noted several possible benefits of a properly implemented Appendix II listing, including better monitoring, reporting, and control of silky sharks entering international trade, which should help to ensure legal and sustainable sourcing, enable stock assessments and subsequent management, and complement existing fishery measures.



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Silky shark school. (*Carcharhinus falciformis*) ©Tomas Kotouc

IUCN and TRAFFIC conclude that “it would appear therefore that the silky shark meets the criteria for inclusion in Appendix II in Annex 2 a of Res. Conf. 9.24 (Rev. CoP16), in that regulation of harvest for trade is required to ensure that the species is not reducing the population to a level at which it becomes threatened.” TRAFFIC recommends CITES Parties accept the silky shark listing proposal, as inclusion in Appendix II can serve as a much-needed platform for international cooperation to address unsustainable trade, and a means to improve catch reporting, and resultant population assessment and fisheries management.

References

Information in this factsheet is based on the relevant listing proposals, IUCN Red List assessments (www.iucnredlist.org), the report of the FAO expert panel, FAO landings data, analyses by IUCN and TRAFFIC, and:

Clarke, S., Harley, S.J., Hoyle, S.D. & Rice, J.S. 2013. Population Trends in Pacific Oceanic Sharks and the Utility of Regulations on Shark Finning. *Conservation Biology* 27: 197-209.

Dent, F. & Clarke, S. 2015. State of the global market for shark products. FAO Fisheries and Aquaculture Technical Paper No. 590. Rome, FAO. 187 pp.

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Call for Action

Listing the silky shark under CITES Appendix II would be:

- in line with the precautionary approach;
- helpful for improving data on fisheries and trade;
- important for ensuring that international trade is held to sustainable levels;
- complementary to national, regional, and global conservation commitments; and
- beneficial in preventing depletion and associated negative effects on ecosystems and economies.

Our coalition urges CITES Parties at CoP17 to:
Support Proposal 42 to include the silky shark in CITES Appendix II.

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