

Capitol Connection

Sharks gain international protection

April 1, 2013 | Author: AAAS member -- Freelance Writer Mary Bates, Ph.D.



Hammerhead sharks are just one of the species to now be listed under Appendix II of the CITES Treaty (Image: Su Neko on Flickr)

In a landmark win for conservation, delegates at the meeting for the [Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species](#) (CITES) in Bangkok voted on March 11 to increase protection for five species of sharks and two species of manta rays. The decision, backed by a coalition of nations, narrowly surpassed the required two-thirds majority and was upheld at the end of the week despite fears that it might be overturned at the conference's final plenary session.

The animals — oceanic whitetip sharks, porbeagle sharks, scalloped hammerheads, great hammerheads, smooth hammerheads, and two manta ray species — will be listed under Appendix II of the CITES Treaty, which covers species at risk of extinction if they are traded unsustainably. Prior to this decision, great white and basking sharks were the only species of elasmobranch (the family that includes sharks, rays, and skates) listed on Appendix II.

The CITES Treaty is signed by 178 countries, and delegates meet every two to three years to review and negotiate changes regarding the international trade of species.

Similar protection programs for marine species, including these sharks, were rejected at previous CITES meetings due in part to vociferous objections from Japan and China, major consumers of shark products. At this year's meeting, 42 countries opposed the shark listing, arguing that regional fisheries should manage shark populations rather than international bodies. However, new support from Latin American and west African countries, in addition to the U.S. and European Union, helped push the vote through.

Shark populations have declined sharply in recent years, with one-third of the 450 known species of shark endangered by overfishing. Scientists estimate people kill [100 million sharks each year](#), around 6-8% of the population. This is an unsustainable amount that, left unregulated, will threaten some species with extinction.

The demand for shark fins, predominantly from China, has increased with the nation's prosperity and led many fisherman to bypass quotas on shark takes with the brutal practice known as "finning:" cutting the fins off live sharks and throwing them back in the water to slowly die from suffocation. The new agreement will not ban the fishing of these sharks, or even the fin trade; instead, strictly controlled permits will be required to export the fins. Regulators, working with scientists, will attempt to determine how much international fin trade is sustainable.

For manta rays, it is the gills that are prized and used in Chinese traditional medicine. Two species of manta ray received new protection against exports at the CITES meeting, supported by 80% of the delegates.

Manta rays and sharks have slow growth and reproduction rates. It is difficult for their populations to recover from big losses, making them vulnerable to overfishing. Crashes in their populations can have a ripple effect across ocean ecosystems, affecting the rest of the food chain and wreaking havoc with the balance of life in the world's oceans.

Conservationists lauded the CITES listing, and the decision is regarded as an international win for science and animal conservation.

Related Links:

["Global catches, exploitation rates, and rebuilding options for sharks" in *Marine Policy*](#)

[Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species \(CITES\)](#)