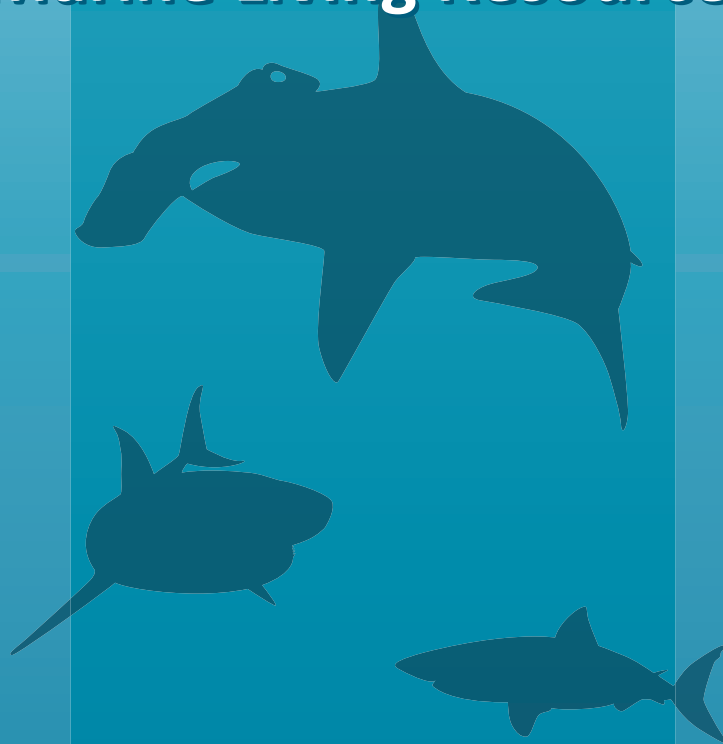


Truth about Sharks and their Utilization : for the Sustainable Use of the Precious Marine Living Resources



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Fisheries Agency of Japan

1 Introduction

Some environmental NGOs argue that sharks are endangered due to the fisheries targeting sharks only for their fins, and that restaurants and transport companies should not deal with shark fins to meet their social responsibility. They request aviation companies and shipping companies not to carry shark fins and request hotel chains and Chinese restaurants not to serve shark fin dishes. Some of these companies gave up dealing with shark fins because of this campaign against shark utilization.

However, is it true that sharks are endangered? Is it true that the fisheries targeting sharks only for their fins have made them endangered? Can we save sharks from extinction if we stop eating shark fins?

The Fisheries Agency of Japan issues this leaflet to answer these questions and to provide correct information about the issues surrounding shark utilization. The Fisheries Agency hopes that this leaflet could help to obtain precise understanding about sustainable use of sharks as precious marine living resources.

2 Are sharks endangered?

While they are simply called “sharks”, there are approximately 500 different shark species. Furthermore, their ecology, biological characteristics and forms of utilization as fishery resources are highly diverse.

Main utilization of meats and fins in Japan is limited to just 4 out of 500 shark species. More than 90% of Japan’s total shark landing is also limited to blue shark, spiny dog fish, salmon shark and shortfin mako shark.

The researches conducted by the Fisheries Agency and the Fisheries Research Agency of Japan have demonstrated that the stock trend of the 4 species are stable. It means that the shark species utilized by Japan as fishery resources are sustainably harvested and not endangered. (Table 1)

Table 1

Species	Current Stock level	Recent Stock Trend
Blue Shark	Medium~High	Stable
Spiny Dog Fish	Medium	Stable
Salmon Shark	Research is underway	Stable
Mako Shark	Research is underway	Stable

It is true that stock status of some shark species are not good. However, fisheries for these shark species are regulated by Regional Fisheries Management Organizations (RFMOs). RFMOs are international organizations which have mandate to regulate fisheries for highly migratory species. RFMOs introduce strict management measures, such as prohibition of harvest of some shark species whose stocks are not abundant. Harvest of the following shark species in the indicated region is prohibited: oceanic whitetip shark (all over the world), silky shark (the Atlantic and Western Central Pacific Oceans), hammerhead sharks (the Atlantic Ocean), thresher sharks (the Indian Ocean) and bigeye thresher shark (the Atlantic Ocean).

Under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of wild fauna and flora (CITES) some shark species which require protection, such as whale shark, basking shark, great white shark, hammerhead sharks, oceanic whitetip shark, porbeagle, thresher sharks and silky shark, are listed in its Appendix II and the international trade of these species are regulated.

As explained above, shark fisheries are regulated based on the stock assessments conducted species by species. Therefore, such statement as “sharks are endangered due to the fishery” is biased one that ignores stock status of different shark species and existence of fishery management measures.

4 Conclusion

In conclusion, it should be clear from above that eating shark fins does not threaten survival of sharks.

Sharks are an important protein source in many countries and, therefore, fishery management based on stock assessment of each shark species is essential to achieve conservation and sustainable use of sharks. Of course, endangered shark species should be protected, but utilization of sharks that are harvested and traded in compliance with the measures adopted by relevant states, RFMOs and CITES should not be prevented. Rather, sustainable utilization of sharks should continue to be promoted from the perspective of efficient use of resources.

Sharks should be sustainably utilized based on accurate knowledge and reasonable judgment.

3 Could sharks be saved if shark fins are not consumed?

As stated in section 2, Japan’s domestic shark fin products are made from shark species harvested sustainably. There is no problem to eat them. Furthermore, RFMOs have established and implemented variety of regulations about harvest and utilization of sharks. For example, it is a legal obligation to fully utilize sharks retained on board. In other words, finning, an activity that carcass of sharks are discarded and only fins are landed, is prohibited and the whole body has to be utilized.

In Japan, variety of the parts of sharks, such as meats, skins, bones and guts are utilized. For example, in the largest shark landing port, Kesennuma, one of the keywords of the city’s economic development project is “effective utilization of sharks”. In many foreign countries, sharks are an important protein source, too. For example, sharks are used in “fish and chips” in Europe, and used in curry dishes in some Asian regions.

Some environmental NGOs argue that only fins are consumed and the rest of body is discarded. However, the statement intentionally exaggerates very limited unusual incidents and advocates them as general phenomena. It is a misguided statement. Therefore, the argument that sharks are endangered due to the fishery targeting only for shark fins is not true.

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) has reported that the volume of shark meat trade has been increasing, while trade of shark fins has been decreasing. This shows that shark utilization will not be eliminated, even if shark fin consumption is prohibited.

Effective use of sharks (Photo: Shark City Kesennuma Promotion Council)



Upper left: Shark Cutlet
Upper right: Shark Leather goods
Under left: Shark Hampen
Under right: Sashimi of heart (Salmon Shark)