



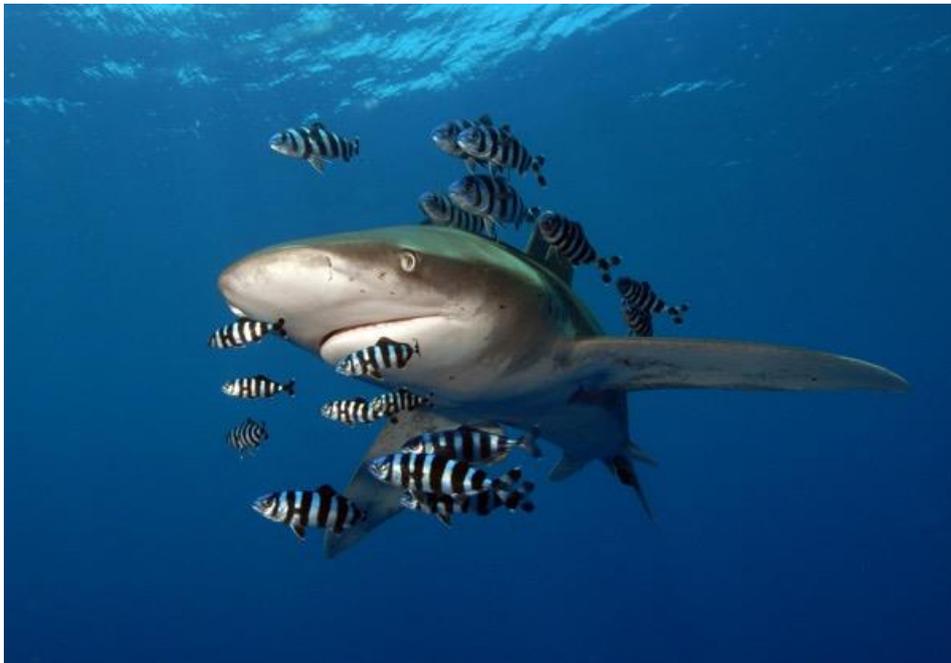
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Media Release

Immediate Release

WWF urges Pacific tuna fishing nations to act now to stop oceanic whitetip shark from going extinct

- WWF urges members of the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC) to prevent extinction of the oceanic whitetip shark by supporting the development of a recovery plan
 - Population of the species has already declined close to 95% in Western and Central Pacific
- The level of decline would qualify the species in that region for the “Critically Endangered” category on the IUCN’s Red List of Threatened Species



Oceanic whitetip shark with pilot fish. © Elke Bojanowski / WWF

Hong Kong, 4 December 2019 – WWF is urging member states attending the 16th meeting of the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC), taking place on 5 – 11 December in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, to adopt critically needed, science-based solutions to prevent the potential extinction of the oceanic whitetip shark and improve the plight of other sharks and rays harvested in the Pacific.

Just decades ago, oceanic whitetip sharks were the most common pelagic shark in the tropical oceans. The situation the species is facing today is catastrophic, with the population in the Western and Central Pacific faring the worst. Whether targeted for their highly prized fins for the international shark fin trade or caught accidentally (as “bycatch”) when fishing for tuna in the high seas, their population has plummeted drastically due to overfishing.



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The latest scientific analysis commissioned by the WCPFC – a regional fisheries management organisation (RFMO) governing tuna fisheries, revealed that their population has declined by around 95%. WCPFC’s analysis also concluded that oceanic whitetip will go extinct in this vast expanse of the Pacific in the long-term at the current levels of fishing. This level of decline would qualify the species in that region for the “Critically Endangered” category on the IUCN’s Red List of Threatened Species, meaning they would be only one step away from extinction in the wild.

If this top predator disappears, so will its role in regulating marine ecosystems – of which so much is yet to be discovered and understood. Their extinction in the Western and Central Pacific would also be a great loss for local Pacific cultures, where sharks hold a special place.

“It is unbelievable that a species that could be counted in the millions in the past is now facing extinction in the Western and Central Pacific Ocean, an area covering almost 20% of the Earth’s surface,” **said John Tanzer, Leader, Oceans at WWF International**. “Urgent action is required to start rebuilding the oceanic whitetip population and to ensure that no other open ocean shark or ray ends up in such a disastrous position in the first place,” **added Tanzer**.

The fact that overfishing for the oceanic whitetip is ongoing, in spite of the official catch and retention ban (a prohibition to intentionally catch and, if accidentally caught, to keep on board) that has been in place since 2011, points to the WCPFC’s inability to manage fishing impacts on this species. WWF is urging member states of the WCPFC to support the development of a recovery plan for the dangerously depleted population of the oceanic whitetip to prevent the species from going extinct. WWF is also urging leaders to finalise and then adopt the comprehensive conservation and management plan (CMM), including a “fins-naturally-attached” policy and catch quotas for all sharks and rays, to prevent other species from following the tragic trajectory of the oceanic whitetip.

“With important decisions made by WCPFC only once a year and their consent-based decision-making process, it is of utmost importance that all member states take action at the upcoming meeting and agree to adopt the recommended, science-based measures. Only this way WCPFC will be able to conserve sharks – including the oceanic whitetip – and move fisheries towards a sustainable future,” **said Dr. Andy Cornish, Leader of Sharks: Restoring the Balance**, WWF’s global shark and ray conservation programme.

Sharks and rays, including the increasingly rare oceanic whitetip shark, continue to make up a large percentage of annual bycatch in Western and Central Pacific, with a number of species subject to unsustainably high levels of fishing. Problems faced by the oceanic whitetip shark in Western and Central Pacific are emblematic of broader issues affecting all pelagic sharks in waters governed by this and other tuna RFMOs. Just at the end of November another major tuna RFMO, ICCAT (International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas), rejected scientific advice to recover the dangerously depleted shortfin mako shark through a “zero-retention policy” (a prohibition to intentionally catch or keep any accidentally caught individuals).

With sharks and rays treated as “bycatch”, they receive far less attention than tuna when it comes to managing high seas fisheries. There are no catch limits for any of the pelagic species, except for the just-introduced quotas for blue sharks in the Atlantic adopted by ICCAT during their recent meeting at the end of November. As with the oceanic whitetip and the shortfin mako, overfishing is the major threat to the 1,200 species of sharks and rays known to science, with 25% threatened with extinction back in 2014. As updated IUCN Red List



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assessments of this highly diverse group of species are likely to reveal in the coming months, the situation today could be significantly worse.

Sharks: Restoring the Balance conservation programme works on issues such as consumption, management, and trade, with projects in 20 countries and territories across six continents. Founded in 2014, the programme is guided by a global 10-year conservation strategy for sharks and rays developed in partnership with other leading conservation NGOs and guided by the IUCN Shark Specialist Group.

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WWF Sharks: Restoring the Balance

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Notes to Editors:

- “High seas” in relation to fisheries or maritime law means waters extending beyond territorial waters of any state.
- Tuna RFMOs have a consent-based decision-making process in place, meaning that a single member can voice objections and thus prevent a new measure from being introduced.
- More information on WCPFC and a list of member states can be found here: <https://www.wcpfc.int/about-wcpfc>
- WWF’s full position, with a detailed description of all recommended shark and ray management and conservation measures, can be accessed here: <https://www.wcpfc.int/node/44516>. In brief and amongst other things, WWF urges WCPFC member states to:
 - request for a recovery plan for the oceanic whitetip shark to be developed by the Commission’s Scientific Committee as soon as possible;
 - prioritise finalising a Comprehensive Shark CMM (Conservation and Management Measure for sharks and rays), which should include:
 - bycatch best practices,
 - fins-naturally-attached policy (the most effective means to address shark finning),
 - a data collection system to estimate numbers of caught and released sharks and rays,
 - a prohibition on wire traces and branch lines (elements of fishing gear made of metal that sharks cannot bite through and free themselves),
 - recovery plans for most depleted species.
- Detailed stock (i.e. population) assessment of oceanic whitetip shark conducted by the WCPFC and published for their Scientific Committee meeting in August 2019 can be accessed here <https://www.wcpfc.int/node/42932>.
- The annual meeting of ICCAT (International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas) took place on 18-25 Nov 2019 in Palma de Mallorca, Spain. The meeting concluded with very mixed results for sharks. More details on which shark-related measures were adopted or rejected can be found here: <https://sharks.panda.org/news-blogs-updates/latest-news/iccat-s-annual-meeting-concludes-with-very-mixed-results-for-pelagic-sharks-in-the-atlantic>