



HUMANE SOCIETY
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Fins-attached shark landings: Costa Rica versus Spain

In September 2010, the government of Costa Rica invited representatives from 13 South and Central American countries to a workshop to showcase the country's fins-attached law in action. Representatives from Argentina, Belize, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, México, Nicaragua, Panamá and Venezuela attended the workshop.

Participants were taken to the docks to witness the arrival of a shark fishing vessel and the offloading of deep-frozen sharks. The sharks were filmed having their fins removed as they were offloaded.

At the end of the workshop, the participants adopted a formal statement¹ urging that the following actions be taken:

- Prohibit finning.
- Require that, at the point of first landing, sharks are landed with fins naturally attached to bodies, if necessary permitting a partial cut to allow for proper storage and species identification.
- Promote the full use of sharks and discourage discards

This was an important initiative, not only because it encouraged countries in the region to enact fins-attached legislation, but because it demonstrates once and for all that, contrary to opinions expressed by Spain, fins can easily be removed from deep-frozen sharks once they are landed.

The film of the workshop and dock visit was also shown at a side event at the FAO Committee on Fisheries meeting in 2011. While there were expressions of support from the delegates, Spain continued to argue that it would not be possible to adopt fins-attached policies in their own fisheries.

However, on reading the various documents that the Spanish fishing industry has produced in defence of its finning policy, it seems clear that there are no genuine technical obstacles standing in the way of adopting fins-attached regulations. Their first argument is that it is less "hygienic" to remove a shark's fins at port. Humane Society International (HSI) is of the view that the conditions on a deck that has been covered in blood and the carcasses of other fish over a period of many years is unlikely to be any more hygienic than the conditions at port.

Secondly, industry representatives claim that frozen shark fins are dangerous to handle and can cause injury. The experience of Costa Rica, where frozen sharks are landed with their fins still naturally attached but partially cut so that they lie flat across the body, indicates that this is not an issue. Indeed, it would



seem more likely that using sharp knives to remove fins from (often living) sharks onboard a fishing vessel would present a far greater threat of injury than removing fins from a dead, frozen shark.

The Spanish fishing lobby also contends that processing shark carcasses at port means that the “cold chain” gets broken. There may be ports where the time lag between offloading and processing sharks and storing them in freezers is fairly lengthy. However, this is not an insurmountable problem. HSI contends that it is up to the industry to ensure that the right conditions prevail wherever sharks are landed. Relatively minor adjustments would need to be made to ensure that the temperature of the carcasses did not rise above the desired point. When it comes to fins, the issue of breaking the cold chain affects only fins that will be traded frozen, not dried.

Finally, the Spanish fishing industry argues that processing carcasses at port means that the products lose their Community status. While the loss of Community status may result in a reduction in profits for the industry in some Member States, this is not a compelling enough reason to delay the adoption of fins-naturally-attached regulations. It is over-optimistic to expect conservation to have no associated costs and, in any case, the long-term future of the world’s sharks should not be held to ransom because of the desire of some commercial operators to avoid paying taxes.



Image: HSI Deputy Wildlife Director Rebecca Regnery handles a frozen shark fin without injury

¹Workshop on Shark Management and Conservation: “improving the application of regulations prohibiting finning” September 7 and 8, 2010. Puntarenas, Costa Rica.