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New Study Reveals Need to Address Interactions between Sharks and Longline Fisheries

HONOLULU (5 September 2007) – The unintended interactions of sharks with open-water longline fisheries could be causing ecological as well as economic problems, according to a report announced today by the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council.

“Shark Depredation and Unwanted Bycatch in Pelagic Longline Fisheries: Industry Practices and Attitudes, and Shark Avoidance Strategies” assesses shark interactions with longline fisheries in Australia, Chile, Fiji, Italy, Japan, Peru, South Africa and the United States. It reveals that the demand for shark meat is increasing and that existing management and monitoring measures for the species is widely lacking.

The study encourages fishery management authorities to begin effective data collection, monitoring and precautionary shark management measures now in preparation for possible further increases in the demand for shark meat and to ensure that shark populations are healthy and shark fishing is sustainable.

It also argues for the development of methods to keep sharks away from longline operations that are not targeting shark species, as well as the need for equipment to ensure that unintentionally hooked sharks are released in ways that promote their survivability.

The study documents an increase in the demand for shark meat at several ports worldwide and a shift in some fisheries toward the utilization of shark meat.

“Sharks are one of the world’s most valuable fishery resources,” explains Kitty Simonds, executive director, Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council. “They provide an important protein source, as well as a luxury item (shark fin soup).”

At the same time, the study finds that most national fishery management authorities regard monitoring and managing of sharks as a low priority. Of the 12 fisheries studied, only two limit the amount of shark retention trips, while five have no measures to manage shark interactions. The result is a worldwide lack of fishery-dependent data for sharks and a need to improve this situation.

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“Sharks and their relatives are much more vulnerable to overfishing and population collapse than bony fishes,” explained report lead author Eric Gilman of IUCN (The World Conservation Union). “They grow slower, mature later and have lower population increase rates. Therefore, methods to manage them may have to differ from traditional fishery management methods.”

Insights gained from this study may benefit fishermen as well as sharks, especially fishermen who want to reduce shark interactions. For fishermen who are not targeting sharks, lost revenue from shark predation on hooked targeted species can amount to several thousand U.S. dollars in a single set in some fisheries.

Practices to deter shark interactions are currently limited—avoid fishing in certain areas or during certain times, move when shark interaction rates are high, use fish instead of squid for bait and set lines deeper in the water. Beyond these strategies, the knowledge to reduce unwanted interactions with sharks is poor.

A prioritized next step is to test promising innovations to reduce unwanted shark hooking and predation and associated gear damage in pelagic longline fisheries. Chemical, magnetic, electrical and electropositive rare earth metal shark repellants and deterrents hold promise, but more research and development is needed.

Moreover, development of specifically designed equipment to release unwanted sharks could improve their post-hooking survival prospects, reduce gear loss and improve crew safety.

The report was produced by the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council in Honolulu, Regional Seas Programme of the United Nations Environment Programme in Nairobi, the Blue Ocean Institute in New York, and eight additional agencies and organizations worldwide.

It is available online at www.wpcouncil.org, www.blueocean.org and www.unep.org/regionalseas/Publications/Shark_Depredation.pdf.

To request a free hard copy, while supplies last, contact lead author Eric Gilman, IUCN Global Marine Programme, at eric.gilman@iucn.org

The Council is the policy-making organization for fisheries management in federal waters (generally 3-200 miles offshore) of the U.S. Pacific Islands. For more information, contact the Council at (808) 522-8220, info.wpcouncil@noaa.gov or www.wpcouncil.org.