National Plan of Action
Conservation and Management of Sharks on the High Seas

Belize High Seas Fisheries Unit

2015
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PART I: INTRODUCTION

1. BACKGROUND

The Belize National Plan of Action for the Conservation and Management of Sharks on the High Seas is developed in the context of the FAO’s Code of Conduct for Responsible Fishing and its general objective for sustainable fishing and follows the guidelines of the International Plan of Action for the Conservation and Management of Sharks (IPOA-Sharks).

On a worldwide basis, shark fisheries are among the unmonitored, unregulated and unmanaged resources. Noting the expanding catch of sharks and the potential negative impacts on shark population, an International Plan of Action for the Conservation and Management of Sharks (IPOA-Sharks) was adopted by the 23rd Session of the UN FAO Committee on Fisheries (COFI) in 1999 (Oliver et al. 1998).

The IPOA-Shark is a voluntary international instrument developed so that countries can adopt positive measures to ensure the conservation and management of shark and their long term sustainable use. The IPOA-Sharks propose that member countries of the FAO should adopt a National Plan of Action (NPOA-Sharks) if their vessels carry out directed fisheries for sharks or their vessels regularly catch sharks in non-directed fisheries. The IPOA-Sharks necessitates that each country that take sharks in their fisheries prepare a shark assessment report (SAR) with the aim of identifying conservation and management measures and any other issues associated with the shark catch, which may be possibly addressed in an NPOA-Shark.

The IPOA-Sharks identifies management standards at a planned level and suggests a collection of basic operational objectives for a NPOA-Shark. The challenge for Belize is to ensure that management strategies for sharks caught by our vessels on the high seas are in place that provides an adequately high possibility of attaining these internationally-accepted objectives for shark stocks.

There exists a need to conduct research to determine the impact of our high seas fishing fleet on the shark population and implement conservation and management measures that will specifically and adequately address Belize’s high seas shark fisheries. The conservation and management of sharks in Belize’s territorial waters is done by the Belize Fisheries Department, which employs the use of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) and Shark Protected Areas (SPAs) in protecting vulnerable shark species. Domestic shark fisheries are governed under the principle of full utilization and national legislation requires that all sharks be landed with fins naturally attached, the latter which also applies to our high seas fisheries.
The high seas fishery for sharks, which is managed by the Belize High Seas Fisheries Unit, has similar concerns for the conservation and management of sharks. The difficulties commonly faced in this fishery are the identification of species after landing and the lack of identification of independent personnel with the knowledge and training in shark species identification. The uniqueness of this fishery, as it is done on the high seas with no interaction with national fisheries also allows for a lack of coordination on the collection of information. Because our vessels do not discharge at local ports, there is also inadequate available data on catches, effort and landing for sharks as Belize relies heavily on other States to obtain and provide this information. This poses difficulty in achieving shark management goals especially in multispecies fisheries where sharks are harvested.

1.2 PURPOSE AND NEED

Traditionally, considered as having a little economic value to large-scale commercial fisheries, sharks have often been neglected by fishery management agencies. Over the past years, sharks have grown in its commercial value and are gradually targeted for its meat, skin, cartilage, teeth, fins, jaws and other organs. They are normally harvested as targeted species in some areas and taken as by-catch together with other more commercially important fisheries. Increasing demands for shark and shark products over the years have led to a number of species being threatened with extinction. Subsequently, concerns have grown in respect to the increase in shark catches and the results this has for some shark species population in several ocean regions.

Sharks are characterized by K-selected life history traits, which include slow growth, low sexual maturity, low fecundity and long life, resulting in low rates of population increase, highly vulnerable to over-exploitation and stock collapse, and slow recovery once the population is depleted. Sharks often have a low stock-recruitment relationship and long stock recovery times when overfished due to their late sexual maturity, low fecundity, albeit with low natural mortality and complex spatial structures (size/sex segregation and seasonal migration (Hoenig and Gruber 1990; Pratt and Casey 1990; Last and Stevens 1994; Camhi et al 1998). Such complex life history traits make them highly vulnerable to overexploitation. As sharks have a relatively low market value, with the exception of their fins, countries may not manage their shark fisheries as effectively as those for high valued species. There is a need to improve the management of directed shark fisheries and certain multispecies fisheries in which sharks constitute a significant bycatch.
Historical fisheries from our high seas fleet indicates that most, if not all of shark species are taken in various fisheries operation. There is a need to stabilize fishing efforts and resource exploitation with conservation and management measures to achieve sustainability in the marine fishery resources. The existing restrictions on knowledge of sharks and practices employed in shark fisheries in many areas are causing problems for their conservation and management. To a great extent, there is an absence of available catch, effort, landing data and species identification. Because of the uniqueness of our fisheries, collection of relevant data on shark is heavily dependent on vessel operator’s information and foreign landing data by inspectors at these foreign based ports where our vessel discharge. Similarly, data sharing between States also poses a problem due to lack of communication and the efforts of these States to readily agree to bilateral agreements or MOUs on data sharing.

The overall purpose of the NPOA-Sharks is to ensure the conservation and management of sharks and their long-term sustainable use by our vessels which operate on the high seas, outside Belize’s territorial waters and Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) which are covered under the purview of the Belize Fisheries Department being the competent authority for domestic fisheries.

1.3 SCOPE

In the context of the NPOA-Sharks, ‘sharks’ are defined as all species in the class *Chondrichthyes* and include sharks, skates, rays and chimaeras and the term “shark catch” is taken to include directed, by-catch, commercial, and other forms of taking sharks. The IPOA-Sharks encompasses both targeted and non-target catch species.

The NPOA-Sharks –High Seas applies to species that are taken by Belize flagged vessels fishing on the High Seas. The NPOA-Sharks is an operational plan. It is a record of both actions already underway and recommendations for actions that could enhance the conservation and management of sharks in Belize’s high seas fishery. The Belize Fisheries Department (Ministry of Forestry, Fisheries and Sustainable Development) is the competent authority for the development and implementation of the NPOA-Sharks locally. The Belize High Seas Fisheries Unit (Ministry of Finance) is responsible for the management of sharks by vessels fishing on the high seas.

The effects of fishing are likely to constitute the highest threats to the sustainability of sharks and subsequently they form the main focus of the International Plan of Action for the Conservation and
Management of Sharks (IPOA-Sharks). The impact of fishing on this species as it affects our high seas fleet currently is also the key focus of Belize’s NPOA-Sharks– High Seas.

The NPOA-Sharks will be further developed in response to new information including that obtained through implementation of actions detailed in this plan.

The NPOA-Sharks will be studied and modified recurrently to ensure on-going effectiveness of Belize’s efforts to address the conservation and management of shark species.

1.4. OVERALL OBJECTIVE OF THE NPOA SHARK-HIGH SEAS FISHERY

The high seas shark fishery of Belize comprises sharks caught by Belize flagged vessels which operate on the high seas.

The main objectives of NPOA-Sharks- High Seas are as follows:

- a. Ensure that shark catches from directed and non-directed fisheries are sustainable;
- b. Ascertaining and provide special attention to vulnerable shark stocks;
- c. Minimize waste and discards from shark catches pursuant to Article 7.2.2(g) of the Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries (example, shark finning);
- d. Encourage full use of dead sharks;
- e. Simplify the documentation/categorization and reporting of species-specific catch and landing data and monitoring of shark catches through bilateral cooperation between States;
- f. Endeavour to cooperate through regional and sub-regional fisheries organizations or arrangements, and other forms of cooperation, with the aim of ensuring the sustainability of shark stocks. Including, where applicable, the development of regional or sub-regional shark management plans;
- g. Cooperate with other States to strive to ensure effective conservation and management of trans-boundary, straddling, highly migratory and high seas stocks of sharks and data sharing; and
- h. Endeavour to collaborate through FAO and the major RFMOs and other international arrangements in research, training and the production of information and educational material.
- i. Adopt measures, such as national inspection programs and observer coverage for vessels that target shark exclusively so as to ensure proper monitoring, data collection and recording.
1.5 ISSUES AND CONCERN

Lack of available catch, effort and trade data as well as species identification has led to poor state of knowledge of shark and shark fishery practices and problems in the conservation and management of sharks both locally and on the high seas. Importance, therefore, is on better understanding of shark and shark fishery practices through enhanced fishery monitoring and progressive management action ensuring their sustainable use in fisheries. Basic knowledge, capacity and skills to identify shark catches to the species level that leads to misidentification of species, recording of synonyms, misspellings, general inconsistencies and absence of standards in terms of recording and reporting and presence of largely unidentified species that are new to Belize, there is a need to develop a standard identification/field guide, data collection and monitoring protocols for a more productive monitoring of species in fisheries. It is also necessary for personnel to be trained on data collection and monitoring technique to better equip them in research and monitoring. Although some personnel has undergone basic training, capacity needs to be regularly evaluated and strengthened to correct identification lapses.
PART 2: BELIZE’S HIGH SEAS SHARK FISHERIES

2.1 CATCH TRENDS OF SHARKS BY OCEAN REGION

It is of significant importance to develop shark fishery regulations for our vessels which operate on the high seas considering that Belize has a fishing fleet which operate internationally. The species of sharks caught by Belize flagged vessels which operate on the high seas are widely distributed over several ocean regions. Our major shark fishery area is within the Eastern Pacific region where majority of our vessels harvest shark as their target species. Historical data over the past five years shows that the major targeted species by our vessels in this area are silky shark, blue shark, mako shark and black tip shark. Least targeted species included dogfish sharks, thresher sharks, moro and hammerhead sharks. In the Atlantic Ocean region, our major shark catches are blue shark and short-fin mako shark. In the Indian Ocean region, lack of accurate catch reporting on this specie and monitoring has hindered the collection of data for this fishery in the area. Similarly the use of nylon filament lines utilized by our vessels in this area is normally not conducive to shark fishing. In the Western Pacific Ocean region, only small by-catches of blue shark are harvested in this area. The table in Annex 1 shows our historical shark catches on the high seas by ocean regions in metric tons.

2.2 HIGH SEAS FISHING FLEET

The composition of Belize’s High Seas Fishing Fleet is governed by its High Seas Fisheries Fleet Policy which specifies a limit of 75 high seas fishing vessels operating in the Atlantic and Easter Pacific Oceans and engaging in fisheries for tuna and tuna-like species, non-tuna species, sharks and the transportation of marine resources. Provisions are made for expansion and fleet development and clearly outline the areas of operation, species and gear types that are authorized.

2.3 CATCHING METHODS

Sharks are caught primarily by fishing vessels using long line as their fishing gear. This is typical throughout all ocean regions where Belize flagged fishing vessels operate. All shark catches are reported by the long line fleet of fishing vessels.
PART 3: SHARK MANAGEMENT, INSTITUTIONAL AND LEGAL STRUCTURE

3.1 Authority

There is a spatial distribution of jurisdiction over the management of sharks in Belize. The Belize High Seas Fisheries Unit, Ministry of Finance, is the competent authority for the development and implementation of the NPOA-Shark-High Seas Fisheries and shark fisheries which is managed under the High Seas Fishing Act, 2013 and its subsidiary regulations. The Belize Fisheries Department is the competent authority for domestic fisheries which includes shark fisheries as well as the management and conservation of the species.

3.2 Legislation

Under the High Seas Fisheries Act 2013, the Registrar of Merchant Shipping, with the authorization of the Minister of Finance, is empowered to make regulations for the proper management of marine species caught by Belize flagged vessels operating in the High Seas. However, there is no specific regulation pertaining to the management of shark fisheries on the high seas, with the exception of those species which are identified by CITES as endangered species and those conservation and management measures adopted by the Regional Fisheries Management Organizations to which Belize is a party. Belize’s new legislation also includes a complete ban on shark finning. Sharks must be landed at all times with their fins naturally attached.

3.3 Regulations

Pursuant to the High Seas Fisheries Act 2013, regulations may be made for the management of shark species, individually or collectively. The Registrar of Ships with the approval of the Minister of Finance is responsible for approving all fisheries regulations including those for sharks. The current list of regulations enacted under our previous HSFA 2003 has in one way or another provided some management measures for the sharks caught on the high seas. More regulations will be formulated to protect additional species as they are being identified through scientific research and recommendations by the Regional Fisheries Management Organizations (RFMO) and other relevant fisheries bodies. There are
presently several Regulations in place in regards to shark management on the high seas as indicated in the table in Annex 2

3.4 International Laws and Policies applicable to shark management

A host of international, binding and non-binding non-fisheries legislation is also promoted for the conservation or management of shark species. Binding instruments include the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna (CITES), United Nations Convention on the Laws of the Sea (UNCLOS), Conservation and Management Measures of different Regional Fisheries Management Organizations such as ICCAT, IOTC, IATTC, and WCPFC.

3.4.1 Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)

The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) is an international Treaty negotiated under the auspices of the United National Environment Program. It was opened for signature at the June 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development and entered into force on 29th December 1993. To date more than 193 countries have become Parties which includes Belize. The three goals of the CBD are to promote the conservation of biodiversity, the sustainable use of its components and the fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising out of the utilization of genetic resources.

3.4.2 Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna (CITES)

The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna (CITES) was established in 1975, to protect species of wild flora and fauna from over-exploitation through international trade. Sharks species which have been listed by CITES as threatened with extinction and for which no international trade are allowed are the basking shark (cetorhinusmaximus), whale shark (rhincodontypus), and the great white shark (carcharodoncarcharias).
3.4.3 United Nations Convention on the Laws of the Sea (UNCLOS)

The United Nations Convention on the Laws of the Sea (UNCLOS), adopted in 1982 and established in 1994 provides the conservation and management of fisheries and other uses of the sea. Its provision on the EEZ (Exclusive Economic Zones) of coastal States and high seas provisions require cooperation between states for the conservation and utilization of highly migratory species.

The UN Agreement on straddling fish stocks and highly migratory fish stocks, adopted in 1995, facilitates implementation on the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) provisions relating to conservation and management of high seas fish stocks. The agreement will establish rules and conservation measures for high seas fishery resources and is complemented by the FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries which sets out principles and international standards that should be followed. Under UNCLOS, oceanic sharks defined as highly migratory species are: bluntnose sixgill sharks (sharks Hexanchus griseus), basking shark (Cetorhinus maximus), whale shark (Rhincodon typus), Alopidae ssp. Carcharindidae spp., Sphyrnidae and Lamnidae.

3.4.4 Regional Treaties

ASEAN Agreement on the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, 1985. Based on the objectives of the World Conservation Strategy, this agreement requires parties to give special protection to threatened and endemic species and to preserve those areas which constitute critical habitats of endangered or rare species, of species that are endemic to a small area and of migratory species.

3.4.5 Other (non-binding)

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), founded in 1948 as the world’s first global environmental organization, is the world’s largest professional global conservation network which brings governments, non-governmental organizations, United Nations agencies, companies, business and local communities together to develop and implement policy, laws and best practice toward biodiversity conservation. Its fundamental expertise is on species, habitats and ecosystems. Its mission is to influence,
encourage and assist societies throughout the world to conserve the integrity and diversity of nature and to ensure that any use of natural resources is equitable and ecologically sustainable.

3.5 Management Measures and Strategies

3.5.1 Licensing System

(1) Belize, through its licensing system restricts the number and type of vessels, areas of operation and type of species that are allowed to target shark and related species. As an overall reassessment of our flag state responsibilities we have also implemented a Fleet Policy Plan which allows only for an “add” and “delete” system of introducing new vessels to our fleet. This regime will allow for no further expansion of our fisheries where sharks are either directly or incidentally caught.

(2) Only vessels engaged in long line fishery will hold licenses to target shark under this Plan

(3) All licensed vessels must have a mobile transceiver unit (MTU) installed and operational.

3.5.2 Prohibitions

(1) Methods such as gillnets and driftnets are prohibited;

(2) Consistent with our policy of full utilization of sharks, shark finning is strictly prohibited. All vessels that engage in shark fisheries are required to land sharks with their fins naturally attached to the carcass.

(3) Fishing effort in the shark fishery will be limited to the total allowable vessels under our Fleet Policy Plan and/or by any restrictions as implemented by a regional fisheries body.
(4) Transfer of catch at sea from the catching vessel to a vessel acting as a carrier and intending to exclusively transport the catch for the purpose of landing or further transshipment is strictly prohibited.

3.5.3 Allowable Catch

The total allowable catch for each vessel licensed to catch sharks as their target species shall be done in accordance with any limitation or policies implemented by national legislation or regional fisheries body.

3.5.4 Observer Coverage

Observer coverage for all vessels licensed under the Belize flag including those which target sharks shall be carried out in accordance with our Monitoring, Control and Surveillance Regulation S.I. No. 39 of 2014. Belize’s Observer Program covers a minimum of 5% of the fleet annually and vessels are preselected for observer coverage based on a risk analysis of the vessels that considers their compliance history, reporting consistency and area of operation amongst other variables.

3.5.5 Inspections

Inspections of shark discharges shall be carried out in accordance with our Monitoring, Control and Surveillance Regulation S.I. No. 39 of 2014 and our Belize High Seas Inspection Plan 2014. This plan highlights the major ports of discharge and the frequency of inspections which is achieved through a combination of appointed Inspectors in some ports and the establishment of an MOU for Fisheries Cooperation with the competent Fisheries Authority in other states.

3.5.6 Reporting

Reporting shall be done in accordance with our Monitoring, Control and Surveillance Regulation S.I. No. 39 of 2014 and shall be reported through standard longline logbooks and approved e-log system.

All catches must be recorded in the shark longline logbooks and electronically via our electronic logbooks by species and weight, inter alia. Shark discards shall also be
reported. Logbooks are required to be submitted at the end of each year, but the electronic reporting will allow for a daily submission of vessel’s catches in real time.

3.5.7 RFMOs

Belize is member to all the regional fisheries management organizations (RFMOs) for the areas where sharks are assumed to be targeted or caught exclusively or incidentally in longline fishing. All shark catches are reported to the RFMOs to facilitate the work of their respective Scientific and Research Committees. This data allows scientists to make recommendations to the various organizations for the adoption of conservation and management measures for vulnerable species. Belize, through national legislation, implements all those measures adopted by regional fisheries bodies which becomes applicable compliance measures for our vessels.

3.5.7 Penalty

Failure to comply with the management measures may result in disciplinary action taken in accordance with our Sanctions Regulations S. I. 32 of 2014. Sanctions may range from a warning to the cancellation of a fishing authorization and recommendation to the national register of vessels for the ex-officio cancellation of the vessel’s registration; and include prohibition from sailing, suspension of fishing authorizations and fines, inter alia.

3.6.1 EDUCATION AND OUTREACH ACTIVITIES

(1) Improving public awareness on FAO IPOA-Sharks and Belize’s NPOA-Sharks among vessel operator is a very important element in promoting sustainable utilization and conservation of shark resources. Additionally, it is essential to collect accurate data in order to accurately evaluate shark resources. In this regard, Belize will continue efforts to improve the awareness concerning the importance of proper fisheries management in accordance with its NPOA-Sharks by implementing and strengthening education and information activities for those related to fisheries.
(2) Literature such as preparation and distribution of pamphlets and posters for species identification has been promoted within Belize’s shark fisheries. These measures will be further reinforced through the following:

i. distribution of Shark Species Identification Sheet (ID-Sheet) to vessel operators and inspectors and observers;
ii. distribution of promotion items such as videos, posters, etc., on the competent authority’s website; and
iii. provision of relevant and updated information to fishers and fisheries organizations.

3.7 PROMOTION OF INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

(1) In accordance with the provision of FAO’s IPOA-Sharks, Belize shall ensure that the implementation and any additional revisions of its NPOA-Sharks are reported to FAO. In addition, Belize will continue to ensure conservation and management of shark species through implementation of measures adopted by regional fisheries bodies and other internationally related organizations.

(2) Belize will encourage cooperation with other States to ensure compliance with national and international shark measures as well as to promote information sharing.

(3) Belize will continue to promote and support the adoption of conservation and management measures for sharks in fisheries management organizations and other such international bodies; keeping in mind that sharks, compared to many other fish, takes longer to reach sexual maturity and have low fecundity, and as such, management measures should consider a precautionary approach in order to effectively protect shark species.

ADOPTED this twelfth day of March, two thousand and fifteen.
REFERENCE


Sharks and Rays of Australia. CSIRO pp. 513. By Last, P.R. and J.D. Stevens 1994;


High Seas Fisheries Act 2013–Government of Belize; 8 November 2013


# ANNEX 1: STATISTICAL SHARK DATA

## SHARK SPECIES HARVESTED ON THE HIGH SEAS IN THE EASTERN PACIFIC AREA IN METRIC TONS

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## SHARK SPECIES HARVESTED ON THE HIGH SEAS IN THE ATLANTIC OCEAN AREA IN METRIC TONS

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## Indian Ocean Region vs. Eastern Pacific Area

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## ANNEX 2: ACTIVE SHARK REGULATIONS

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