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EIGHTH MEETING OF THE
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Nairobi, 20-25 November 2005
Agenda item 14 (b)

**BULLET SUMMARY OF THE DIALOGUE ON
WHALE SHARK CONSERVATION**

**Organised by the Secretariat of the
Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species (CMS)
and the Shark Specialist Group of the IUCN Species Survival Commission**

**21 November 2004
IUCN World Conservation Congress
Bangkok**

Co-organiser and facilitator: Lyle Glowka, CMS Secretariat

Co-organiser and resource person: Sarah Fowler, Chair, IUCN Shark Specialist Group

Twenty-five people took part in a 90-minute dialogue to discuss the conservation status of the Whale Shark and possible national level and international cooperative measures to ensure its conservation. The list of participants is attached.

A bullet summary of points made follows.

Conservation status and international cooperation

- Classified as Vulnerable on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species; listed on Appendix II of CITES; listed on Appendix II of CMS; strictly protected in several Range States; listed on Annex I (Highly Migratory Species) of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)
- Collaborative, ocean basin approach needed to manage highly migratory whale shark
- Fisheries stimulated by international demand for whale shark meat are relatively “new” and appear to be confined to coastal waters (not on the high seas) where whale sharks aggregate to feed on, for example, coral and fish spawn; Taiwan allocates a quota of 80 fish a year; a fishery may exist in Indonesia; other target meat fisheries (e.g. India, Philippines) have been shut down
- Indicative list of anthropogenic threats: demand for meat (also liver oil and fins); aquarium trade; vessel collision

- There has been a decline in landings and sightings in the waters of many Range States
- Consumptive uses (for meat): on the dock: US\$7000 for a 2 ton fish, US\$8-10/kg for fins; retail US\$ 5-17/kilo of meat (Taiwan), +/-US\$15,000/fin (mainland China)
- Non-consumptive uses are of high economic importance: fish aggregators (in tuna fisheries) and ecotourism (latter worth over \$US 1–7 Million/State/year)
- National management: 2 approaches: strict protection or fisheries management (Taiwan's quota of 80 sharks is premised on a lot of unknowns); whale sharks could be used to bridge an artificial dichotomy that fisheries and conservation management are different and mutually-exclusive
- Article 64 regarding international cooperation on highly migratory fish stocks of UNCLOS emphasises "optimal use" of fisheries; cooperation between States either directly or through fisheries management organisations
- Regional fisheries organisations (RFOs): no management of sharks yet underway
- UNCLOS Fish Stocks Agreement: despite ratification in 2001, no management is proposed for sharks listed on Annex I
- FAO IPOA on Sharks: potential framework for whale shark conservation but voluntary; poor implementation; less than 10 percent of States and no RFOs have adopted shark management plans
- CITES listing requires international trade to be derived from sustainable fisheries, but doesn't address domestic commerce/trade/use

Three general questions were posed to the group

1. What more do we need to know about the conservation and fisheries status of the whale shark?
2. How can national level management be applied for such a highly migratory species and shared resource?
3. Do we need more action at international level to supplement existing conservation and management measures?

Major points made in the Question/Answer Session

- We have a limited baseline of knowledge on whale shark, but we have enough information to promote conservation/fisheries measures
- No stock assessment data; observed individuals seem to be decreasing in size (e.g. there is a trend to smaller individuals in Western Australia), implying population depletion by fisheries elsewhere

- Long-term movements are poorly understood; we don't know where the sharks breed (two records of pregnant females); records of recruitment (new-borns) are mainly based on predator stomach content analysis
- We have limited or no whale shark aging or growth data; researchers need to repeatedly identify and measure living animals over time and analyse vertebral growth rings in stranded or harvested specimens
- More information on sex ratios would be useful in order to identify possible differences in migration patterns by sex and maturity
- There are a number of projects world wide involving photo-identification of whale shark, including a UK-based data sharing project that acts as a confidential broker of information between different research groups and collates individual diver contributions through the dive organisation PADI
- More volunteer divers could be trained to sex whale sharks and participate in photographic monitoring programmes
- Encourage greater analysis of age, growth and maturity of carcasses landed in the Taiwanese fishery (e.g. by Taiwan Ocean University)
- Management measures needed are either strict protection or sustainable fisheries management based on sound science; marine protected areas will be important; tourism needed to be managed or at least premised on a code of conduct
- Whale shark oil economy: traditional hook-harpoon fishery in Iran identified, which likely occurs throughout the Persian Gulf and perhaps elsewhere (throughout Indian Ocean?), for whale shark oil to waterproof dhows (high value but not necessarily monetary); private initiative in Iran to substitute whale shark oil with another oil; Government had not taken measures; this type of fishery probably is not recorded by national or regional fishery agencies or, therefore, by FAO
- Shark oil (+/- whale shark oil if caught as by-catch) has been used in East Africa for dhows and in India; traditional Maldives whale shark fishery for waterproofing fishing boats was closed following decline in capture rates
- There may be a connection between the whaling moratorium and the capture and utilisation of whale sharks; the Philippines had subsistence whaling; this then became a subsistence whale shark fishery which then intensified to supply an international market
- Whale sharks are sensitive to disturbance by divers and boats
- Greater promotion and enforcement of ecotourism codes of conduct is needed: Western Australia, Belize and Philippines have developed codes of conduct
- The dive tourism industry is fractured and someone commented that it would be better to work directly with dive operators than through the international dive certification organisations
- A meeting is scheduled for Western Australia in May 2005 on Ninglo Reef; there will be a whale shark component

- The CMS Secretariat made the following points: (a) It will be important to determine the level of priority CMS should give to initiating a process to further develop international cooperation on the whale shark; (b) any CMS Agreement will need to embody a partnership as CMS's resources are limited; (c) should we group whale shark with other species (cetaceans, Dugong, other sharks)?; (d) we need to engage the dive and tuna industries
- Grouping makes sense if it is with other sharks (eg, basking shark (not on CMS Appendices) and great white); don't group with marine mammals
- Sharks generally are interesting because they are ½ fisheries and ½ conservation and can be used to bridge the two seemingly but not divergent competencies; in the end it does not matter what use they are put to as the population dynamics are the same
- Whale shark is a flagship species
- The representative from the Seychelles noted that the Seychelles marine GEF project addresses whale shark and there is an on-going tracking programme; there needs to be a global effort looking *inter alia* at fisheries as well the biology of the species