



**CONVENTION ON
MIGRATORY
SPECIES**

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Agenda Item 31.3.14

**PROPOSAL FOR A CONCERTED ACTION FOR
THE BASKING SHARK (*Cetorhinus maximus*) ALREADY LISTED
ON APPENDICES I and II OF THE CONVENTION***

Summary:

Marine Research and Conservation Foundation (MARECO) and the Irish Basking Shark Group have submitted the attached proposal for a Concerted Action for the Basking Shark (*Cetorhinus maximus*) in accordance with the process elaborated in Resolution 12.28 (Rev. COP14).

*The geographical designations employed in this document do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the CMS Secretariat (or the United Nations Environment Programme) concerning the legal status of any country, territory, or area, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries. The responsibility for the contents of the document rests exclusively with its author.

**PROPOSAL FOR A CONCERTED ACTION FOR
THE BASKING SHARK (*Cetorhinus maximus*) ALREADY LISTED
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Proponent(s)

Irish Basking Shark Group (IBSG), Marine Research and Conservation Foundation (MARECO)

Target species, lower taxon or population, or group of taxa with needs in common

Class: Chondrichthyes

Subclass: Elasmobranchii

Order: Lamniformes

Family: Cetorhinidae

Genus: *Cetorhinus*

Species: *Cetorhinus maximus*

Listed on CMS Appendices I and II

Geographical range

The basking shark is a highly migratory species, found worldwide in temperate waters. Basking sharks typically occupy water temperatures of 9-17 °C but can tolerate a more extreme range of 6-27 °C (Johnston et al. 2022), from the surface to over 1200 m (Gore et al. 2008). In the North Atlantic, they are observed in shallow, coastal habitats from April to September forming large aggregations at recognised hotspots, such as those in the Republic of Ireland (Martin & Clark, 2008; CSAS, 2008). In the Pacific, basking sharks are mainly reported from October to May, historically along the California coast, moving from California to Mexico and Hawaii (Dewar et al., 2018; Squire, 1990). However, since an eradication campaign in the latter half of the 20th Century, basking shark populations have declined in the Pacific Coast of the United States and Canada by as much as 90%, and sightings along these coastlines are now rare (CSAS, 2008; McInturf et al. 2022). Although data are limited in the Southern Hemisphere, basking sharks are seasonally found in parts of South America and Southern Africa, with historical and recent records in both Brazil and Argentina (Lucifora et al., 2015). Shifts in basking shark occurrence and population declines have been observed across the globe (CSAS, 2008; McInturf et al., 2022).

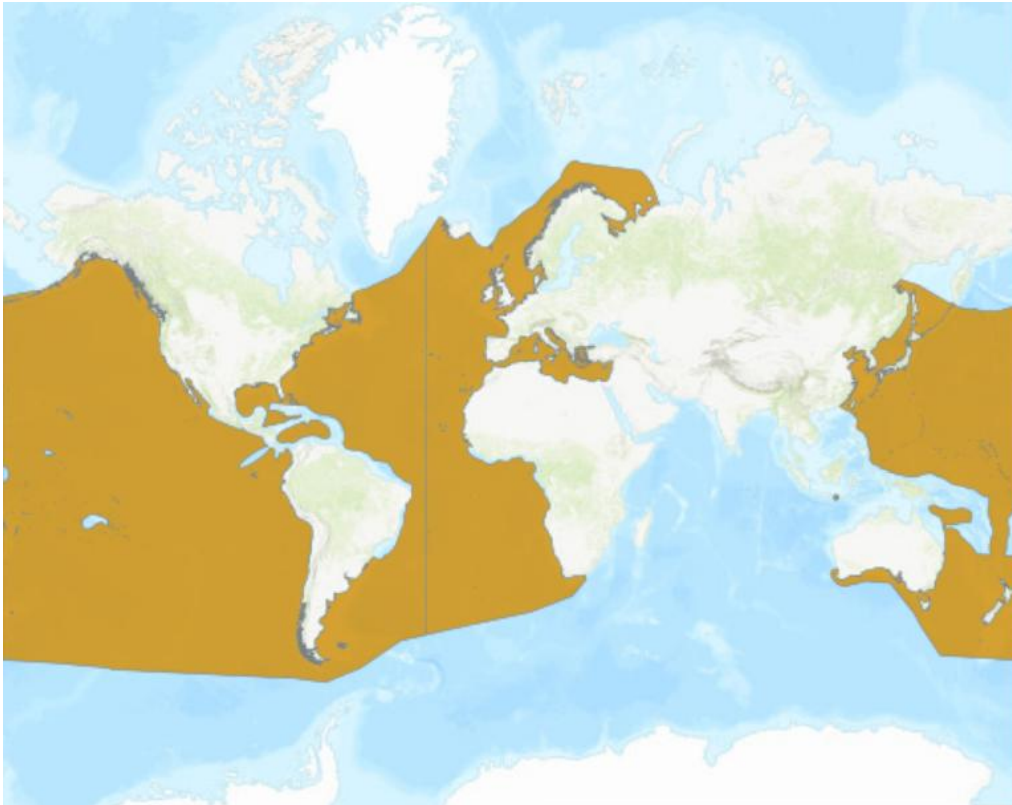


Figure 1: Distribution of the basking shark (©IUCN Red List).

Summary of activities

- 1) Relevant conservation organizations facilitate research, education, and engagement with policymakers, so that Parties can effectively engage with other Multilateral Environmental Agreements, regional fisheries bodies (RFBs), and other relevant entities to enhance basking shark management (prevention of bycatch and ship strikes) including the development of the IUCN SSC SSG Conservation Strategy and Action Plan for Pelagic Sharks and Rays, in cooperation with the Sharks MOU;
- 2) Identify inconsistencies in the level of protection provided by different Party Range States and make recommendations to regional or national bodies under whose management the basking shark falls, to encourage alignment with protective measures globally;
- 3) Develop unified international guidelines for best practices for tourism operations, including distance and speed limits, from countries with established basking shark tourism (e.g. Ireland, UK);
- 4) Encourage research into the impacts of fisheries on basking sharks (fisheries-induced mortality, discards), the design of bycatch mitigation strategies and the assessment of post-release mortality of basking sharks across regions, demographics (i.e. male, female, adult, juvenile) and fishing gears;
- 5) Encourage research to assess the impacts of vessel strikes on basking sharks (rate of incidents, mortality, and methods to mitigate impact);
- 6) Identify critical habitats for basking sharks and promote/ support research to document basking shark movements between parts of their range (e.g. tagging) to identify possible migration routes or corridors, which will inform management strategies;

- 7) Support research on the population-specific and/ or region-specific impacts of climate change on basking sharks;
- 8) Standardise sightings, bycatch, and vessel strike data collection methodology across Party States to better understanding global patterns of habitat use and threats that the species face throughout its range.

Associated benefits

The species would benefit from improved management and conservation efforts across jurisdictional boundaries. This document should act as a blueprint for CMS Parties to help with their implementation of obligations under CMS, whilst also delivering a sustainable future for basking sharks. Although basking sharks are found worldwide, most of the research has focused on the North Atlantic. Further research on basking shark population size, distribution, foraging patterns, and migratory patterns is essential to effectively address global threats. This Concerted Action could bring about more consistent protection for migratory species and a greater impact for the work of CMS.

Ecotourism related to basking sharks is growing rapidly in the North Atlantic, where seasonal aggregations attract considerable public interest. If the impacts of fisheries, boat use, drone traffic and human activity can be managed sustainably, basking shark tourism has the potential to deliver significant socio-economic benefits to local communities and could create alternative livelihoods.

Timeframe

Please refer to Activities and Expected Outcomes.

Relationship to other CMS actions

This CA would significantly contribute to the implementation of the following mandates established under CMS and the Sharks MOU:

- Resolution 12.22 and Decisions 13.62 to 13.63 on Bycatch
- Resolution 13.3 and Decisions 13.71 to 13.73 on Chondrichthyan Species
- Decisions 13.66 to 13.68 on Marine Wildlife Watching
- Sharks MOU Programme of Work 2023-2025: Development of a global strategy
- and regional action plans for pelagic sharks

Conservation priority

A 2018 reassessment of the species' global conservation status for the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species classified the species as globally Endangered (Rigby et al. 2019). This was owing to abundance estimates well below historic levels, the ongoing demand for the high-value fins, a global population reduction of 50–79% suspected over the past three generations (102 years), and trans-Atlantic migrations (Gore et al., 2008) leading to considerable debate on the possibility of a single genetic population in the North Atlantic. This would have significant implications for conservation bodies and the scale on which protective measures are implemented.

Major contemporary threats to basking sharks include fisheries catches, bycatch in nets, and vessel strikes. Researchers have documented that ship strikes of basking sharks have occurred in Páirc Náisiúnta na Mara (Ciarraí), Republic of Ireland, highlighting the importance

of regulations, such as boat speed limits in important basking shark habitats (Chapple et al., 2024). Entanglements in nets have also been reported, both in Ireland (via underwater photographers; Michael O'Donnell, Nicholas Pfeiffer, pers. obs.) and other locations worldwide (e.g. Hernandez et al. 2011). International trade in basking sharks is still occurring, potentially illegally (Magnussen et al. 2007), despite the species being listed on Appendix I of CMS, the lack of research findings that support sustainable take at any level and the lack of evidence that utilisation can be sustainable.

Relevance

The Basking Shark is currently listed in CMS Appendices I and II and the CMS and Annex 1 of the Memorandum of Understanding on the Conservation of Migratory Sharks. Collective action is essential for the conservation of this species' due to its highly migratory nature, with basking sharks on Annex I (Highly migratory species) on the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Some Range States do not have legal protections for basking sharks (e.g. Japan, Indonesia), though they may have conservation legislation that benefits basking sharks.

This CA will play a crucial role in strengthening the political commitment to basking sharks and ensuring the coordinated and timely implementation of conservation measures.

Absence of better remedies

Only one Tuna Regional Fisheries Management Organization (Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission) has adopted management measures for this species, and the mandate of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) is narrowly focused on ensuring that international trade does not endanger the species further. Therefore, this Concerted Action provides an important avenue for addressing persistent threats and lack of cooperative management for this species, as well as promoting further research and conservation action.

Basking sharks are currently listed under Appendix II of CITES, however this only covers the international trade of basking sharks and does not consider factors such as vessel strikes, climate change, bycatch, unregulated tourism, drone traffic and anthropogenic disturbance – all key threats to basking sharks. Basking sharks also make trans-oceanic migrations and thus spend significant time in the high seas, where there are limited protection measures. The Sharks MOU, which also lists the basking shark in Annex 1, shall be invited to cooperate in the implementation of the proposed actions and to provide technical guidance as appropriate.

Many of the proposed actions, including assessing the impacts of fisheries on basking sharks, documenting connectivity between critical habitats and developing strategies for mitigating threats globally to the species, will align with the recently ratified High Seas Treaty.

Readiness and feasibility

There are committed and engaged non-governmental organisations (NGOs), scientific experts, and community organizations ready to support Range States in developing, funding and implementing collaborative work. Recent initiatives at other international fora have shown that expert networks exist that could support Range States with the implementation of the proposed activities. Support from the Sharks MOU and Cooperating Partners would be valuable in facilitating the development and execution of the action plans.

Likelihood of success

With support from engaged NGOs, experts and organisations, these Concerted Actions have a high likelihood of success. Moreover, the alignment of some of the Concerted Actions herein

with the proposed Conservation Strategy and Action Plans for Pelagic Sharks and Rays under the Sharks MOU, means that there is already active stakeholder engagement. No risk factors were identified that have the potential to significantly jeopardize the success of the proposed activities.

Magnitude of likely impact

It is anticipated that these Concerted Actions can improve the management and conservation outlook of the basking shark, with a greater degree of protection for the species across its geographic range by encouraging all CMS Parties to engage in these activities. Simultaneously, it can pave the way for greater consideration of basking shark conservation in the high seas by working together with RMFOs.

Tourism is a fast-growing industry (e.g. in the UK and Ireland) and basking sharks are becoming increasingly popular, particularly in locations where sightings appear to be increasing (e.g. Ireland; McInturf et al., in review). It is expected that the demand for basking shark tourism will rise globally, becoming both a threat and an opportunity. If well managed, this economic activity can assist in the management of the species, help raise awareness and facilitate research. This Concerted Action under CMS can provide effective guidelines to ensure this practice is sustainable and equitable, with a model replicable to other species.

Cost-effectiveness

One of the key components of the Concerted Actions is to encourage cooperation between Parties, information and knowledge exchange, and the development of effective strategies. If conservation successes can be replicated and best practices (such as tourism guidelines) established, this collaboration will prove vastly more cost-effective than individual countries forging their own path separately.

Consultations planned / undertaken

Research in Ireland is currently funded and underway by experts from Oregon State University and Trinity College Dublin, with support from the Irish Basking Shark Group (IBSG). The first International Basking Shark Conference in almost two decades was held in Galway in August 2025 and had approximately 120 attendees representing individuals from across the globe. A workshop held at the conference had the specific goals of ensuring collaboration amongst all groups and individuals holding or collecting basking shark data and developing stronger data sharing and management across international boundaries. A database of available basking shark data is currently under development by the Shark Trust (UK). International Collaborators have been working with NOAA to compile data from basking sharks in the Northeast Pacific and the IBSG have formally consulted with government officials in Ireland. Basking shark working groups in the Salish Sea and Northeast Pacific, in collaboration with NOAA, are also developing an independent sightings scheme, including opportunistic sightings reports and data from online sources (e.g. social media).

Researchers in the UK, Ireland and US/Canada are currently undertaking or planning to undertake research that will expand our understanding of the transatlantic movements of basking sharks as well as their vulnerability to vessel strikes and bycatch.

Activities and expected outcomes

Activity	Outputs/Outcomes	Timeframe	Responsibility	Funding
Management				
Facilitate research, education, and engagement with policymakers, so that Parties can effectively engage with other Multilateral Environmental Agreements, RFBs, and other relevant entities.	Improved long-term population outlook for basking sharks; Provide up-to-date recommendations (e.g. white papers) to Parties with relevant information related to basking sharks so that they may develop science-based policies at MEAs, RFBs, and other relevant entities to enhance basking shark management.	2026-2028	NGOs, Researchers, groups and individuals with expertise in marine species management and policy engagement (e.g. The Irish Basking Shark Group (North Atlantic Focus))	
Identify inconsistencies in the level of protection provided by different Party Range States and make recommendations encourage alignment with protective measures globally.	Closed loopholes in protection for basking sharks at national and/or regional levels; Incorporate a dedicated section on basking sharks (or dedicated sub-sections) in the IUCN Shark Specialist Group's Pelagic sharks & rays conservation strategy.	2026-2028	NGOs, Range states, Researchers and groups with management and policy engagement expertise (e.g. The Irish Basking Shark Group - North Atlantic Focus)	
Sustainable Tourism				
Develop unified international guidelines for best practices for tourism operations.	Voluntary protocols for responsible basking shark tourism interactions established/ All Parties with tourism activities informed of good practices and encouraged to include those into their tourism management plan; Published guidance document on responsible basking	2026-2028	NGOs, Researchers (e.g. The Irish Basking Shark Group - North Atlantic Focus)	

Activity	Outputs/Outcomes	Timeframe	Responsibility	Funding
	shark tourism, make available online and shared with relevant tour operators globally.			
Research				
Support the assessment into the impacts of fisheries on basking shark interactions (e.g., fisheries-induced mortality such as bycatch).	<p>Interactions incidence and mortality rates determined;</p> <p>Proposals to reduce risk of interactions of basking sharks produced (e.g. based on likelihood that sharks are at or just below surface seasonally and in specific locations);</p> <p>A better understanding of the impacts of fisheries on backing shark populations; Whatever information is available at the time will also be incorporated into the basking shark section of the AP for pelagic sharks and rays.</p>	2026-2029	CMS Parties (and non-Party Range States); NGOs, Researchers, Groups with fisheries management expertise.	Paul M. Angell Foundation Conservation Grant (for research funded in Ireland)
Support the assessment of the impacts of vessel strikes on basking sharks.	<p>Support the assessment of the impacts of vessel strikes on basking sharks;</p> <p>Interactions incidence and mortality rates determined;</p> <p>Proposals to reduce risk of interactions of basking sharks produced (e.g. based on likelihood that sharks are at or just below surface seasonally and in specific locations);</p>	2026-2029+	CMS Parties (and non-Party Range States); NGOs, Researchers (e.g. The Irish Basking Shark Group - North Atlantic Focus)	Paul M. Angell Foundation Conservation Grant (for research funded in Ireland)

Activity	Outputs/Outcomes	Timeframe	Responsibility	Funding
	<p>A better understanding of the threats posed to basking sharks vessel strikes, which can be used to inform future management actions.</p>			
<p>Identify critical habitats and understand habitat connectivity and migration routes.</p>	<p>Critical areas identified; Migratory routes identified; Priority areas for conservation (PAC) identified (e.g. predictable feeding/breeding areas); A global database of basking shark key habitats based on sightings reports; PACs identified and shared with global initiatives (e.g. ISRAs).</p>	<p>2026-2029+</p>	<p>NGOs/Research groups/State and federal agencies/ IUCN SSG (ISRA) Multiple research groups (/ 'basking shark network' could foster collaboration and attempt to coordinate analyses across multiple regions?)</p>	<p>Paul M. Angell Foundation Conservation Grant (for Research in Ireland), EU PEACEPLUS programme funding, Commission for Environmental Cooperation (US, Mexico, Canada);</p>
<p>Support assessments into the impacts of climate change on basking sharks.</p>	<p>Fine-scale regional maps of impacts of climate change on basking shark distributions, to supplement large-scale predictions (Sun et al. 2024).</p>	<p>2026-2030</p>	<p>NGOs, Researchers (e.g. The Irish Basking Shark Group - North Atlantic Focus)</p>	<p>Paul M. Angell Foundation Conservation Grant (for research in Ireland)</p>
<p>Standardise basking shark data collection.</p>	<p>Shared databases with consistent methodology.</p>	<p>2026-2030</p>	<p>NGOs, Researchers (e.g. The Irish Basking Shark Group - North Atlantic Focus)</p>	

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