

SOS - SAVE OUR SHARKS

The fact that the Fisheries Council discussed sharks on the agenda of their December meeting in Brussels represents something of a breakthrough. The German minister drew the attention of the Council to those European species of shark that are now threatened with extinction like the porbeagle and the spurdog. They demanded an urgent action plan for sharks including conservation measures and TAC's and quotas. The Commission promised to produce such a plan in 2008.

The over-exploitation of sharks in European waters has reached crisis point. Some species, like the *Squalus acanthias* or Spurdog now face extinction unless urgent action is taken to provide them with protection. In the meantime, chip shops throughout the UK regularly sell Spurdog under the pseudonym 'Rock Salmon', lulling the public into believing that this is some sort of common species of fish which they can safely eat with chips and not a critically endangered shark. It is sold in batter and is a white, boneless meat which is particularly popular with children.

But UK fish and chip shops are not the only culprits. Schools in Belgium, Germany and France often have it on their canteen lunch menus. In Germany it is known as See-Aal (Sea Eel) and in France it is sold as Aiguillat Commun or Saumonette d'Aiguillat. In fact the spurdog is typically caught in inshore waters around our coasts. Recreational sea-anglers in Scotland will be familiar with this small species of shark and indeed they have voluntarily begun a tag and release scheme to help monitor the migratory patterns of these fish. But vast over-fishing by commercial fishermen has led to the serious decline of this slender, white-spotted shark in recent years and the species has now been placed on the WWF top-ten list of critically endangered species facing possible extinction.

It is essential that all Fish & Chip Shops stop selling Rock Salmon immediately. In the meantime I hope that the European Commission's action plan will propose urgent steps to provide this slow-maturing species of shark with proper protection, introducing strict TAC's and quotas for spurdog.

I also hope that the European Commission's plan will address the serious depredation of the Blue Shark which has been exploited ruthlessly for its fins. Shark finning is the practice where fishermen cut the fins of a shark and throw the rest of the shark back in the water - often while still alive. The practice has officially been illegal in the EU since 2003 but the high value of

shark fins and the poor enforcement of the ban make the rewards of finning far greater than the risks.

Scientists agree that the most effective way to implement a shark finning ban is to require that sharks are landed whole with fins still attached. However, in order to grant fishermen flexibility to store fins and carcasses separately, most of the world's finning bans are enforced through a fin to carcass ratio. Current EU regulations state that fins must not exceed five percent of the total shark landed. In theory, this should avoid sharks being thrown back finless by requiring all of the corresponding carcasses to be landed. In practice the regulation is often abused.

As a result, around a third of the 130 shark species in Europe, including the Blue Shark, are threatened and another 20 percent are in immediate danger of joining them. Sharks are vulnerable to fishing because they reproduce much later in life, and they have few young. The loss of shark species in our oceans would upset the whole ecosystem. The practice of shark finning is cruel and wasteful. Often sharks are thrown back alive and left to a miserable death. Unfortunately, sharks have an image problem that means they have few sympathisers outside the conservationist community.

It is high time Fisheries Commissioner tightened up the loopholes in the finning regulations. I look forward to a tough action plan from the Commission which will give our shark populations a chance to recover.

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