

Fact Sheet: Porbeagle Sharks



Porbeagle sharks are:

- exceptionally slow-growing and vulnerable to overfishing
- heavily exploited for their valuable meat and fins
- classified by IUCN as *Critically Endangered* off Europe
- highly migratory but unprotected in international waters
- legally fished in Europe counter to scientific advice, and
- in urgent need of conservation measures.



Biology

Porbeagle sharks are exceptionally vulnerable to overexploitation and long lasting depletion due to their slow growth, late maturity, and small litters. Females do not reproduce until their teen years and give birth to only about four pups after an 8-9 month pregnancy. Like most sharks, porbeagles are top predators in marine food webs and therefore critical to keeping the ocean in balance.

Fisheries today

Porbeagle meat is among the most prized of all shark meat, particularly in Europe. The large fins of porbeagles are valuable for use in “shark fin soup”, an Asian delicacy. Schools of porbeagle sharks are therefore sporadically targeted, but also often kept if taken incidentally, as “bycatch”, usually by pelagic longliners. Scientists note that most hooked porbeagle sharks make it to the boat alive; many could therefore survive capture if released.

Currently, vessels from France and Spain take most of the EU catch of porbeagles, through targeted fisheries and as bycatch. Boats from the UK and Ireland also land porbeagle sharks taken incidentally.

Population status

Intense fishing has left the Northeast Atlantic porbeagle shark stock the most depleted porbeagle population in the world. Norwegian landings from this region declined by 99% between 1936 and 2005. The IUCN-World Conservation Union includes porbeagle on their *Red List of Threatened Species*, as *Vulnerable* globally; the Northeast Atlantic population is classified as *Critically Endangered*.

Scientific advice

Scientists with the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) and the Scientific, Technical and Economic Committee for Fisheries (STECF) have advised for several years that Northeast Atlantic porbeagle fisheries end and measures to prevent bycatch of the species be established. In 2008, scientists added a recommendation that the EU prohibit porbeagle landings.

Conservation measures

In 2007, the European Council of Fisheries Ministers agreed the first porbeagle Total Allowable Catch (TAC) for European Community waters and vessels, based on a proposal from the European Commission. The amount of the TAC (581 tons) is in line with recent catches and therefore not low enough to lead to population recovery. In November 2008, however, the European Commission proposed an EU porbeagle TAC of zero for 2009. Final TACs will be set by the Council of Ministers December 17-19 in Brussels.

Sweden has protected the porbeagle shark, but ended up with 1ton of the EU porbeagle TAC. Norway has banned targeted fishing for the species, but allows the retention and sale of porbeagles taken as bycatch.

In 2007, an EU proposal to limit international trade in the porbeagle shark to sustainable levels through a listing under Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) was defeated. The lack of porbeagle fishing restrictions imposed by the proponent Party (EU) was a powerful argument used to defeat the proposal.

In 2008, the EU secured the listing of porbeagle sharks under Appendix II of the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS). This action is meant to spark international cooperation in the development of regional initiatives to conserve the species.

Porbeagle sharks are highly migratory and yet there are no bilateral or international fisheries management measures for the species.

Call to Action

Northeast Atlantic porbeagles, among the most imperiled sharks in the world, have been subject to unsustainable fishing for far too long. The EU has called on countries around the world to conserve porbeagles, but has yet to impose effective restrictions on its own targeted take and bycatch of the species. For years, scientists have advised that fishing for this *Critically Endangered* population should cease and that bycatch minimization measures should be imposed. It is high time to heed that advice.

The Shark Alliance urges EU Fisheries Ministers to improve the outlook for beleaguered porbeagle sharks by working to secure:

- An EU TAC of zero for porbeagle sharks in 2009
- Complementary measures to minimize bycatch and discard mortality
- Development of a comprehensive EU porbeagle recovery plan
- A ban on porbeagle retention under the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT), the Northeast Atlantic Fisheries Commission (NEAFC), and the Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organization (NAFO), and
- Prompt implementation of the European Community Plan of Action for Sharks.