



“Where there are sharks, can there be fishers?”

On the Importance of Shark Fisheries Management in Southeast Asia

by Olivier Delahaye Gamucci

Introduction

The great white shark devouring innocent swimmers is a fading myth from the 70s and 80s. Today, the concern raised in international fora is the excessive catch of sharks around the world. As such, the long overdue recognition of the need for sustainable shark fisheries management has at last been acknowledged in the ASEAN Region, as reported in the first issue of *Fish for the People*.

Shark fishing is a difficult issue to address because of its nature. Around the world, sharks are mostly non-targeted catches. In some countries, they are considered by-catch, and are mostly or completely discarded. Fishers there may even regard them as pests or nuisances. In other regions, such as Southeast Asia, fishermen make good use of sharks, as secondary catches of significant value.

The difficulty in managing shark fishing is caused by the global lack of information on the subject. It is still widely misunderstood, as it is largely both unregulated and unmonitored. The reason for this is the nature of shark fishing itself, shark typically being captured as a non-targeted catch in low quantities in the course of daily fishing operations. But even a small daily shark catch by a fishing unit provides substantial economic return, shark fins being preserved and processed backyard until sold.

In fact, trade in sharks and shark products is vast and, in some cases increasing, as it is often highly profitable. Sharks may be used not only for their meat but also for their fins, skin, cartilage and internal organs. Recent concern about the sustainability of shark fishing has been raised in regard to the increased trade in shark products such as fins, cartilage and liver oil, trade which is likely to have played a significant role in the augmentation of shark harvests in recent years in many regions of the world.

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In addition, the market for shark products, particularly the increasing demand for shark fins, does not recognize the product value in term of species, but in terms of size, due to various usages for Chinese cuisine. This further constrains efficient collection of data on the shark trade by fisheries management authorities, and impedes understanding of the nature of shark fishing.

In October 2002, during the Fish Trade and Environment Meeting held in Bangkok, ASEAN-SEAFDEC Member Countries unanimously agreed to incorporate shark fisheries management measures into their respective national fisheries management policies

and framework. The recently developed International Plan of Action (IPOA) for Sharks underlined the need for information on the catch, efforts, landings and trade, as well as on the biological characteristics of sharks and their identification, in order to develop proper management.

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Meanwhile, management authorities are also discussed, especially in the context of transboundary issues, since some shark species are highly migratory species that do not respect political boundaries. The effective management of shark fisheries must, therefore, be addressed at the regional level to include all populations throughout their range of distribution. The prevailing ASEAN common position is that the management of commercial fisheries, including sharks, should come under the purview of the FAO.



*Unloading of sharks caught using longlines in Sarawak waters
(courtesy of MFRDMD/IPP Bintawa)*

Recent milestones in shark fisheries management in the region

The sustainability of regional fisheries was comprehensively discussed during the ASEAN-SEAFDEC Millennium Conference in November 2001. During the conference, Member Countries recognized several environment-related issues including shark and sea turtle by-catch, and the need to comprehensively address these fisheries management-related issues. At the same time, it was recognized that international fisheries policies are increasingly being discussed and agreed at the global level. In this regard, the Resolution and the Plan of Action of the Millennium Conference emphasized the importance of increasing the participation and involvement of ASEAN countries at international fora in order to safeguard and promote ASEAN interests. However, this can only be achieved if the region adopts a common stand based on regional policies.

During the past 18 months, the ASEAN position on regional environmental issues has been discussed in various meetings, of which the ASEAN-SEAFDEC Regional Meeting on Fish Trade and Environment, held in Bangkok in October 2002, was specifically focused on sharks. A series of recommendations were concluded, notably concerning the shark issue, which included a common position for regional fisheries management and trade together with measures to improve regional shark fisheries management (a complete description of those can be found in the Proceedings of the Fish Trade and Environment meeting, which can be obtained from SEAFDEC). These recommendations specifically included consideration of the development of National Plans of Action (NPOA) on Sharks, within the framework of IPOA.

The shark issue was extensively discussed at the 12th Meeting of the Conference of Parties to CITES (COP12) in Santiago, Chile, in November 2002. Several controversial issues were raised during the meeting,

especially concerning the identification of a competent agency for the management of aquatic commercial species and the criteria to be used to determine whether a species is endangered.

Managing Shark Fisheries – a new SEAFDEC project

The SEAFDEC project on sharks, called Management of Shark Fisheries and the Utilization of Sharks in the Southeast Asian Region, is under a Component of the Japanese Trust Fund program on Environment-Related Tasks in the Southeast Asian Region, funded for five years, from early 2003 to the end of 2007. Ultimately, the project's goal is to support the formulation of a regional policy and management mechanisms for shark fisheries in Southeast Asia.

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The project comprises two phases. The first phase is a one-year study aimed at collecting essential regional baseline information on shark fisheries. This concerns not only the status and trends of shark stocks, but also the usage and trade of sharks in the region. This phase, a practical first step, is to be initiated by a Regional Consultation Meeting on shark fisheries data collection. The outcome of the initial study will be discussed at another Regional Consultation Meeting on Shark Fisheries in 2004 and used as the basis for the development of policy on shark fisheries and the consideration of the long-term program aimed at sustainable shark fisheries in the region. It is hoped that ASEAN Member Countries will consequently be able to get a clearer understanding of their respective shark fisheries, with a common stand in future important international events, such as the 13th Conference of Parties (COP13) of CITES to be held in Bangkok, Thailand in late 2004.

After COP13, the second phase of the project will be initiated to further assist ASEAN Member Countries to formulate their own NPOA on Sharks.

First Regional Technical Consultation on Shark Fisheries

The first Regional Technical Consultation (RTC) on Shark Fisheries was organized in Vientiane, Laos PDR, in May 2003. It was attended by delegates from ASEAN-SEAFDEC Member Countries, namely Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, and Japan, together with representatives of SEAFDEC Departments.

The Consultation was held back-to-back with the meeting of the ASEAN Sectoral Working Group on Fisheries (ASWGF_i) so as to obtain immediate policy support on technical initiatives. This arrangement enabled ASEAN Member Countries to develop the required activities in a harmonized manner, for the interests of both technical staff and policy makers.

The main purpose of the RTC was to provide a technical basis to initiate the 1st phase of the SEAFDEC project on shark fisheries. The Consultation also emphasized the need for commitment and close collaboration in the implementation of the project.



Participants to the first Regional Technical Consultation on Shark Fisheries, organized in Vientiane in May 2003



Fins are the parts of shark commending the highest prices (courtesy of MFRDMD/IPP Bintawa)

Status and trends of shark fisheries

The first critical element for managing regional shark fisheries is to assess the current status of shark stocks. As such, the RTC confirmed that the project would start to collect data on shark catch and fisheries for one year, from July 2003. In the longer term, after the completion of the first phase, trends in shark stocks would be evaluated through the continuation of the survey.

With the support of SEAFDEC, each ASEAN Member Country has agreed to collect three main kinds of information in their selected landing sites (see Box below). The selection of these sites will take into account the regularity and volume of shark catch landed in the area, representatives of the major national ecosystems and types of fisheries. The modalities of access and convenience of communication are practical factors that will have to be jointly considered during the site selection.

Data to be collected by each ASEAN Country on shark catch and fisheries at each selected landing site:

1. General description of shark fisheries, including their socio-economic importance to local communities
2. Landing data (total catch of shark)
3. Research on shark biological data (with parameters such as size by sex, species composition, maturity, etc.)

The RTC also agreed that all shark species commonly caught and landed by fishers in each ASEAN Member

Country would be covered by the project. As the taxonomy and identification of sharks can be an important constraint on the collection of accurate data, SEAFDEC and Member Countries will develop national identification sheets to support data collection on selected species.

Utilization and trade of sharks

The description of the regional utilization of sharks is another important element to understanding shark fisheries. The regional trade of sharks will also be considered, since the utilization of sharks is closely related to markets. All ASEAN Member Countries will provide information collected by their relevant national authorities, especially on the shark trade. The RTC also agreed that if the utilization of sharks will be observed at the selected landing sites, the trade description should first be limited to Singapore, a clearly important shark trade center. Subsequently, the market survey would be expanded to other ASEAN countries where the shark trade is also important, such as Malaysia or Thailand.

“...the completion of the project’s first phase [...] will publicize ASEAN’s seriousness in tackling shark fisheries management issues”

It is expected that the outcomes of the survey will show comprehensively how sharks catches are utilized in the region.

Meanwhile, to support the identification of shark products on the markets, such as fins, SEAFDEC will

develop species identification methods for the region, which could be based on morphological characteristics or on aspects of the denticles on the skins of sharks.

Towards a better understanding of regional shark fisheries

Shortly after the completion of the project's first phase, SEAFDEC will publish a report that will include complete findings, analyses and recommendations in order to develop regional management of shark fisheries. This will publicize ASEAN's seriousness in tackling shark fisheries management issues.

Other means of publications will also be used to inform the public, including the web-based SEAFDEC Digitized Atlas, an issue of "Fish for the People" featuring regional shark fisheries, and a series of leaflets to give snapshots of current national situations.

No more time to delay

The need for serious efforts to achieve sustainable regional fisheries has long been recognized, but still needs to be urgently addressed throughout the region. The issue of sharks harvested without proper monitoring and management has been shown to be a great threat to the sustainability of regional fisheries. Global initiatives such as CITES may soon restrict fishing operations by imposing stringent conservation measures. COP13 is imminent; SEAFDEC and

Species Identification sheet of major species found in Southeast Asia Region



One of the species identification sheets for the most commonly found species in the ASEAN waters, developed for the ASEAN-SEAFDEC study on Shark Fisheries

ASEAN Member Countries must demonstrate their capacity to tackle this issue at the regional level. This will require ASEAN to seriously initiate work toward achieving sustainable fisheries, considering the well-being of its fishermen, and marking the words: "Where there are sharks, there can be fishermen!"

About the author

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In the exposed ovaries of 1.3 m female bull shark, eight youngs presenting fully develop features were discovered upon dissection (courtesy of MFRDMD/IPP Bintawa)