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CITES Parties Reject Shark Proposals By a Narrow Margin

Assistant Secretary Tom Strickland, head of the U.S. Delegation to the Convention on the International Trade of Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), expressed disappointment that the Parties did not grant protection to four species of sharks considered today at the meeting of the Conference of the Parties. The U.S. and Palau had introduced two proposals to list several species of hammerhead sharks and the oceanic whitetip shark under Appendix II to manage the international trade of these highly threatened species. The decisions were reached after intense discussion among the 175 nations represented at the Convention.

“This decision is a major loss for marine conservation,” said Strickland. “Sharks play a critical role in the marine environment. As a result of these decisions these species will continue to be overexploited in international trade. We are encouraged, however, by the strong majority vote in favor, and we will continue our efforts to protect these shark species.”

The final proposal for the hammerhead shark species was not adopted by a count of 75 in support, 45 opposed and 14 abstentions, only 5 votes away from the two-thirds majority needed for adoption. The final proposal for the oceanic whitetip shark was not adopted by a count of 75 in support, 51 opposed and 16 abstentions, with the same narrow margin.

The three sharks included in the first U.S. proposal were the scalloped hammerhead (*Sphyrna lewini*), great hammerhead (*Sphyrna mokarran*), and smooth hammerhead (*Sphyrna zygaena*). The U.S. had amended this proposal to remove the sandbar shark (*Carcharhinus plumbeus*), and dusky shark (*Carcharhinus obscurus*) due to information provided from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations that these shark species did not meet the criteria for listing. The second proposal was for the listing of the oceanic whitetip shark (*Carcharhinus longimanus*). The U.S. also amended both proposals at the request of the United Arab Emirates and other Parties to delay implementation for 24 months to allow time for capacity building and implementation guidance to be developed to assist in the identification and enforcement of these proposals.

“While we are disappointed with the outcome of the vote, NOAA will continue its efforts through international partnerships to support the global conservation and management of sharks,” said Jane Lubchenco, Ph.D., Under Secretary of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere and NOAA Administrator. “We appreciate the support from the other member nations who voted in favor of the proposal.”

Sharks are over-harvested in many parts of the world, primarily for their fins. Most shark fins are exported to Asia, where they are a main ingredient in shark fin soup, which is considered a delicacy in many Asian countries. Due to their low productivity and high economic value, populations of hammerhead sharks in some areas have suffered severe declines.

The United States and Palau worked together on this proposal because of the current threats to these shark species and the belief that these species met the criteria for listing in Appendix II of the Convention. Unlike other fishery resources, sharks are not managed by a regional fishery management regime, and should have an international management structure in place to ensure sustainable harvest. The U.S. will continue to work with the international community to find opportunities to protect sharks in the future.