

The best way to protect heavily depleted shark populations? Stop trying to catch them!



The silky shark is one of two heavily depleted pelagic sharks in the western and central Pacific (image: Alan C. Egan).

It was previously thought that the two heavily depleted pelagic sharks in the western and central Pacific — the silky and the oceanic whitetip — were victims of unintended bycatch. A startling new study by SPC, however, shows that sharks are actually being specifically targeted by some tuna longline boats operating in the equatorial Pacific Ocean.

Dr Shelton Harley, Principal Fisheries Scientist in SPC's Oceanic Fisheries Programme, said:

The results of this work were quite unexpected and pretty exciting. We knew that almost all the longline catch of these species was caught by boats targeting tuna but, when we analysed the data collected by independent Pacific Island fisheries observers, we discovered that a lot of the sharks were being caught on special lines with wire traces and shark bait attached to the floats on the longlines. In fact, these lines took up to half of all silky and oceanic whitetip sharks captured on the observed longline trips.

These findings were heralded as great news by the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA). "Both of these species are in a bad way and if it was accidental bycatch then it might be a difficult problem to solve, but here we see that the main problem is these appropriately named

'shark lines' (see Fig. 1). FFA members proposed that these shark lines be banned in 2013, but some fishing countries argued that the technique was important for non-shark species," said FFA Deputy Director-General, Wez Norris.

The recent study found, however, that no less than 12 of the top 15 species caught on these special lines were sharks (Fig. 2); mahi mahi (2nd), great barracuda (7th) and wahoo (12th) were also caught on these lines. In addition to silky shark (1st) and oceanic whitetip shark (3rd), the list included several other shark species that have been recognised by international organisations as being of concern, such as tiger sharks and two species of hammerhead sharks.

Based on these findings and the confirmation that shark-targeted fishing is occurring in the western and central Pacific where the highly depleted silky and oceanic whitetip sharks are found, FFA members again called for banning this fishing technique at the Western and

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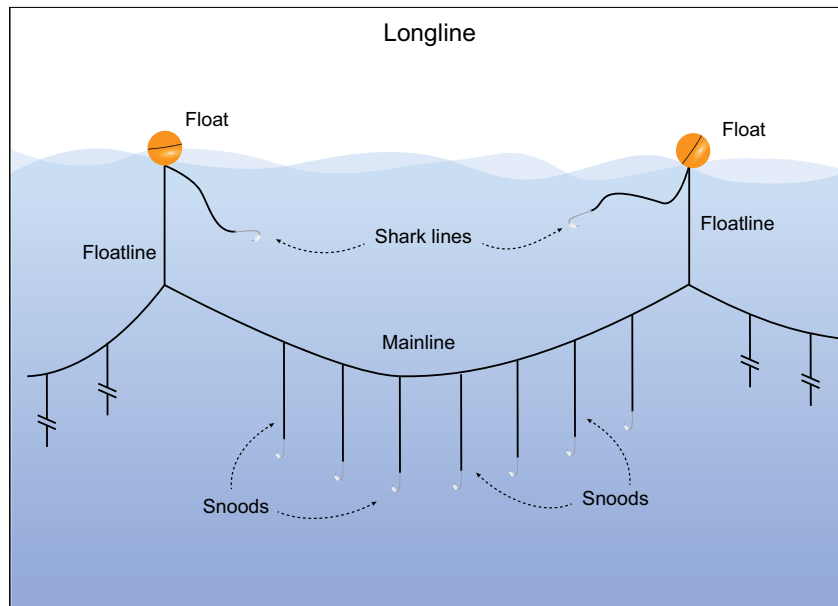


Figure 1. How shark lines are added to tuna longlines.

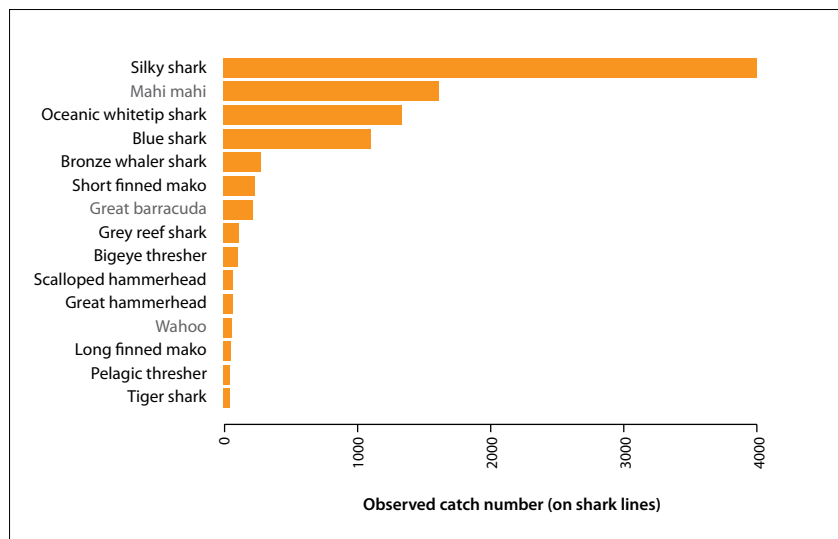


Figure 2. The 15 main species caught on shark lines during the observed fishing trips.

Central Pacific Fisheries Commission meeting held in Apia, Samoa, in December 2014. In one of the few agreements made at the meeting, it was agreed that vessels either not use lines directly attached to floats or not use wire leaders.¹ Further, the Commission agreed that any country that has shark-targeted fisheries must provide a plan to the Commission that explicitly demonstrates how the fisheries aim to avoid or reduce catch and maximise the number of live releases of silky and oceanic whitetip sharks caught incidentally. The effectiveness of this measure will be reviewed in two years.

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¹ <https://www.wcpfc.int/system/files/CMM%202014-05%20Conservation%20and%20Management%20Measure%20for%20Sharks.pdf>