

A large white shark is swimming in clear blue water above a green seagrass bed. The shark is the central focus, swimming towards the right. The water is bright blue, and the seagrass is vibrant green. The overall scene is a healthy marine ecosystem.

supply and demand: the EU's role in the global shark trade

ifaw

Executive Summary

executive summary

Since the early 2010s, global shark conservation work has come a long way. At that time, sharks were considered a side item in conservation conversations; even an afterthought and almost no management existed. Today, shark management issues are a core component of many conservation conversations, especially relating to their catch, trade and contributions to global marine biodiversity health. In the span of just 10 years, the beginning of a global framework to monitor and manage shark populations has started to emerge.

However, while the world has made significant progress in its management of sharks and rays in recent years, the actions taken have not been enough. Shark populations continue to decline rapidly worldwide. **More than 50% of shark species are threatened or near threatened with extinction, and pelagic sharks (species of sharks found on the high seas) have declined more than 70% in only a 50-year period.** Adding to the concern, a recent study found that shark populations were functionally extinct on 20% of reefs surveyed globally.

Small or large, coastal or high seas—sharks are disappearing, with the piecemeal management efforts to date failing to stop their decline.

Global shark declines are driven by international demand for shark fins and meat, coupled with widespread lack of management for both the catch and trade of shark species. **While many place the burden of change on the consumptive countries, primarily in Asia, equally responsible for these declines are countries with internationally operating fishing fleets and trade in shark products.**

IFAW developed this study to examine the role of the [European Union \(EU\)](#) in the global shark trade and steps needed to ensure that the EU becomes a positive player ceasing its contribution to the decline of shark species, as well as providing recommendations for the way forward. Previous studies have examined the EU's role as a leading shark catcher (Okes

& Sant, 2019), as well as a major supplier for the global shark meat trade based on graph theory (Niedermüller et al., 2021). **This current study provides the first comprehensive picture of the EU's role as reflected in official raw customs data from Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (referred to as Hong Kong SAR hereafter), Singapore and Taiwan province, China (referred to as Taiwan province hereafter), covering both fin and meat import, re-export and export data compiled over an extensive period (2003-2020).** This has allowed us to examine up-to-date trade routes between the EU and major shark fin hubs, identify discrepancies in reporting and suggest improvements from both a traceability and management perspective.

This study found that despite known population declines, the EU continues to be a significant player in the global export of shark fins, with [EU Member States supplying on average 28% of the shark fin-related imports into Hong Kong SAR, Singapore and Taiwan province and even up to 45% in 2020.](#)

Every country participating in the global shark trade must take actions, both at a national and international level. Historically, the EU has championed shark and ray trade management measures at conventions such as the [Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora \(CITES\)](#) or the [Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals \(CMS\)](#), but with only 25% of the global trade currently subject to sustainable trade limits and populations in rapid decline, clearly additional steps must be taken. Other similarly resourced governments, such as [Canada](#) and the [United Kingdom](#), have taken strong precautionary action in recent years to ban their trade in (detached) shark fins due to well-reasoned sustainability concerns. If the EU is to adhere to its biodiversity and sustainability ambitions while remaining one of the largest traders of shark products, it must once again step into a leadership role and set the global tone for trade management and reform needed to improve the tracking of shark products traded internationally; and to

prevent the widespread extinction of sharks. Given its significant role, action by the EU to better monitor and track the trade of shark products, as well as to advocate for sustainable trade limits via [CITES Appendix II listings](#), would shift global markets towards a better, sustainable future for sharks.

recommendations

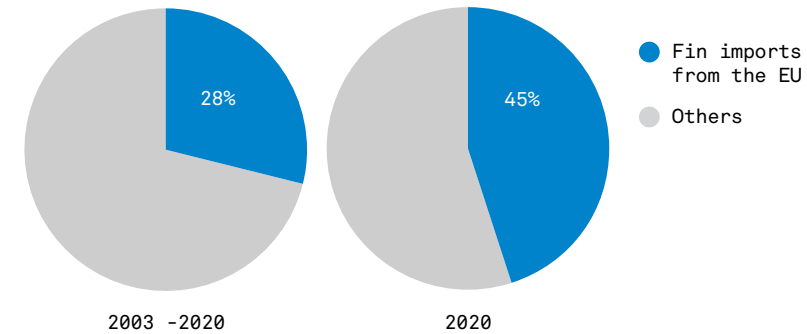
1. Improve recording of data and trade records via a review of the Harmonized System (HS) commodity codes for shark products and standardise code use with key trading partners
2. Ensure that any shark species found in the international shark product trade is listed in CITES Appendix II
3. Build domestic capacity for long-term trade monitoring through trade data analysis
4. Prioritise the use of trade data to combat illegal wildlife trade in sharks and shark products



▲ View of the caudal fins of a stack of blue sharks (*Prionace glauca*). Covered with ice and sold at the Port of Vigo, Galicia, Spain.
▶ A blue shark swims in the ocean.

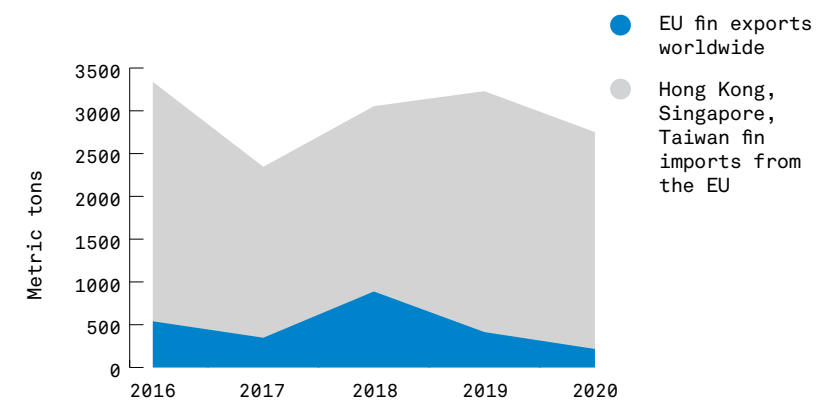
visual data overview of the EU's role in shark fin and meat trade

study period 2003-2020



188,368 t

(metric tons) of shark fin products were imported into Hong Kong SAR, Singapore and Taiwan province combined, with the EU responsible for almost a third of this import (on average 28.35%, 53,407.49 metric tons). From 2017 onwards the EU's role increases and accounts for almost half of the shark fin imports in 2020 (45.42% in 2020). Whereas global shark fin-related exports to these trade hubs have been declining, the proportion of export by EU has increased.



data discrepancies

between import data from Hong Kong SAR, Taiwan province and Singapore compared to the EU export data: the aggregated import data consistently displayed a considerably higher import figure than the corresponding total export data from the EU (to all countries). The discrepancy between the two datasets ranges from 1,650.08 metric tons to 2,318.18 metric tons, suggesting a concerning case of potential misreporting in the shark fin-related trade.

* 'shark meat' covers all data from shark meat-related customs codes
'shark fin' covers all data from shark fin-related customs codes



Photo: © Robert Marc Lehmann

top five EU member state sources for shark fin imports

into Hong Kong SAR, Singapore and Taiwan province

	Reported sources	Total reported trade (metric tons)
1st	Spain	51795
2nd	Portugal	642
3rd	Netherlands	621
4th	France	295
5th	Italy	25

top five EU member state destinations of shark meat exports

out of Hong Kong SAR, Singapore and Taiwan province

	Reported destinations	Total reported trade (metric tons)
1st	Italy	4245
2nd	Spain	680
3rd	Greece	674
4th	Bulgaria	560
5th	Cyprus	91

The shark meat-related exports and re-exports from these hubs to the EU were comparably low. Shark meat is most often consumed domestically within the EU or in South America and South Korea, which has not been analysed with this study.



Photo: © Shane Gross

International Fund for Animal Welfare

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about IFAW

For over a decade, IFAW has been working with governments around the world to support better management for sharks and rays. From the development of shark identification materials for fisheries, customs and enforcement officers, to raising awareness on the conservation needs of shark species, and building the capacity of governments to meet their obligations under international conventions such as the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) and the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS). IFAW also provides technical support for governments looking to enact progressive and precautionary management for shark catch limits, or prohibitions when warranted, at a national level.

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▲ Grey reef shark.

Cover photo: © Shane Gross
A bonnethead shark.

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