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# 'Historic' day for shark protection

By Matt McGrath Environment correspondent, BBC News



The oceanic whitetip is found in tropical and warm temperate seas

Three types of critically endangered but commercially valuable shark have been given added protection at the Cites meeting in Bangkok.

The body, which regulates trade in flora and fauna, voted by a two-thirds majority to upgrade the sharks' status.

Campaigners hailed the move as historic and said the vote represented a major breakthrough for marine conservation.

The decisions can still be overturned by a vote on the final day of this meeting later this week.

The oceanic whitetip, three varieties of hammerheads and the porbeagle are all said to be seriously threatened by overfishing.

Their numbers have declined dramatically in recent years, as the trade in shark fins for soup has grown.

Manta rays are killed for their gill plates which are used in Chinese medicine.

Shark supporters have been attempting to get Cites to protect these species since 1994. But there has long been strong opposition to the move from China and Japan.



A Great White Shark attack survivor's surprising response.

But a number of factors have changed the arithmetic.

Experts say the critical factor has been a shift in South American nations, who've come to understand that sharks are more valuable alive than dead.

"They've come to realise, particularly for those with hammerhead stocks, the tourist value of these species and the long term future that will be protected by a Cites listing," said Dr Colman O'Criodain from WWF International.

Regulate, not ban

While the vote to upgrade these shark species to Appendix 2 does not ban the trade, it regulates it. Both exporting and importing countries must issue licences. If a nation takes too many of these species, they can be hit with sanctions on the range of animal and plant products that are governed by Cites.

## **Protected sharks**



- **The oceanic whitetip** was once a widespread large shark species, but its numbers show a drastic decline
- It appears as bycatch in pelagic (open sea) fisheries, but its large fins are highly prized, used in shark's fin soup and in traditional medicine
- **Hammerhead sharks** are known for their distinctive head shape which may have evolved in part to enhance vision
- The great and scalloped varieties are endangered; the smooth hammerhead is considered vulnerable. All have been given added protection
- **Porbeagles** are found in cold and temperate waters of the North Atlantic and Southern Hemisphere
- Targeted commercial fishing and unintentional catches pose the biggest threat to this shark, which has a low reproductive rate

As the votes went on there were smatterings of applause in the hall and some high fives among campaigners.

"It is really significant for Cites to come of age like this," Dr Susan Lieberman told BBC News.

"To say we can deal with these species, we can manage the international trade and lets not be afraid of marine species."

The extension of the authority of Cites into the international trade in fish has long worried China and Japan and the Asian nations were strongly against these proposals.

But many West African countries, who have seen their native shark fisheries destroyed by large offshore operations, voted in favour of the restrictions.

Another factor was money. Especially cash from the European Union.

The head of delegation told the meeting that extra money would be made available to help poorer countries change their fishing practices.

"If there's a need for it the funding will be available," Feargal O'Coighligh told the meeting.

The amendments can still be overturned in the final session of this meeting. And this realisation is tempering the celebrations.

"Cites is ready to come of age for marine species, " said Dr O'Criodain.

"As long as we hold these results in plenary. Maybe warm champagne is the right note."

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# Landmark shark ban upheld at conservation meeting



By Matt McGrath Environment correspondent, BBC News, Bangkok



Three varieties of hammerhead will now be regulated under Cites for the first time, a move that campaigners say will help save the species

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Pro-shark fishing nations have narrowly failed to overturn a landmark protection deal struck at the Cites conservation conference in Bangkok.

Japan and China tried to block trade regulations on three critically endangered shark species by re-opening the debate in the final session.

But delegates refused the request by a wafer-thin majority and the shark ban was upheld.

The decision is being seen as a landmark win for animal conservation.

Campaigners say it is a truly historic day for the species where science triumphed over politics.

On Monday, the decision to increase protection for oceanic whitetips, porbeagle and hammerhead sharks had [only scraped past the two third majorities](#) required by a handful of votes.

Campaigners were extremely worried that China and Japan, the main opponents of the measures, would be able to muster the one third support needed to re-open the debate and block the ban.

In a tense session here in the conference centre, they failed by just over one percent.

'Major step'

UK environment minister David Heath who had just arrived in Bangkok told BBC News that this was a great day for the Convention.

"I'm absolutely delighted. I think this is a major step forward today. What we saw was member states across the board say we are not going to be diverted from our path," he said.



Manta rays have been heavily hunted for their gill plates used in some Chinese medicines. The proposals won't ban the fishing of these sharks but it will mean that for the first time, the international trade in them will be regulated.

Similar attempts at previous meetings of Cites had ended in failure. What seems to have made the difference here in Bangkok was the unity of Latin American nations who all stood behind the proposals.

Hesiquio Benitez from the Mexican delegation told BBC News that this decision was good for sharks and for those communities that make their living from the sea.

"It's important to know that this is not prohibiting trade for domestic markets, it is not against the fisheries communities. It is to have more control, to have better assessments in the populations," he said.

Campaigners who had worked for decades to get these species uplisted to Appendix 2 of Cites said it was a truly historic day.

"This is an historic day for marine conservation," said Glenn Sant from Traffic International.

"Shark populations are in freefall, but have been thrown a lifeline today - Cites has finally listened to the scientists," he said.