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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 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.

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

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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 let's 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'Coigligh told the meeting. "Cites is ready to come of age for marine species," said Dr O'Criodain.