

TOP 10 NOMINATION FORM

2020 Topic: Illegal wildlife (plants and animals) trafficking and unsustainable trade

Species must meet these qualifications:

- Must be native U.S. species or international species with significant U.S. demand
- Must be experiencing substantial decline (do not have to be threatened/endangered listed)
- Must be directly or indirectly impacted
 - Direct: exploited as trophies, pets, medicines, etc.
 - Indirect: impacted by imported exotics or imported disease vectors (e.g., chytrid)

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Nominated Species (Common Name & Scientific Name): Oceanic whitetip shark, *Carcharhinus longimanus*

Question 1: Threat to the Species

How is the species and/or its habitat threatened by illegal wildlife trafficking and/or unsustainable trade? Note the extent of the threat and whether it is direct or indirect. Include references to relevant scientific studies. Does the species face any associated political threats?

Oceanic whitetip sharks, once one of the most abundant pelagic shark species, have suffered over 98% population declines due to severe overfishing worldwide.¹

Oceanic whitetip sharks historically have made up about 1% of the international fin trade, which sounds low, but given the large number of sharks and rays worldwide, it is in the top 30 species/families traded annually.² Their large fins fetch high prices on the international market, which incentivized retention when caught as bycatch in high seas tuna fisheries, taking it from one of the most abundant large vertebrates to Critically Endangered in just a few decades.

¹ Rigby, C.L., Barreto, R., Carlson, J., Fernando, D., Fordham, S., Francis, M.P., Herman, K., Jabado, R.W., Liu, K.M., Marshall, A., Pacoureau, N., Romanov, E., Sherley, R.B. & Winker, H. 2019. *Carcharhinus longimanus*. *The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species* 2019: e.T39374A2911619. <https://dx.doi.org/10.2305/IUCN.UK.2019-3.RLTS.T39374A2911619.en>.

² Clarke, S., Magnusson, J.E., Abercrombie, D.L., McAllister, M. and Shivji, M.S. 2006a. Identification of shark species composition and proportion in the Hong Kong shark fin market using molecular genetics and trade records. *Conservation Biology* 20: 201-211.

Fields, A.T., Fischer, G.A., Shea, S.K.H., Zhang, H., Abercrombie, D.L., Feldheim, K.A., Babcock, E.A. and Chapman, D.D. 2017. Species composition of the international shark fin trade assessed through retail-market survey in Hong Kong. *Conservation Biology* 32(2): 376–389.

The marked decline in the population of oceanic whitetip sharks led to a broad suite of management measures aimed at preventing further decline of the species by managing catch and trade. All four tuna Regional Fisheries Management Organizations (tRFMOS) have prohibited the catch, sale and retention of the species in every ocean basin—currently the only species of shark that has this high a level of protection in these bodies. In 2013, oceanic whitetip sharks were also one of the first commercially traded shark species listed in Appendix II of the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), meaning that any continued trade in this species had to be sustainable and legal. In 2018, the US listed the oceanic whitetip shark as ‘threatened’ under the Endangered Species Act. And just last year, the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS) listed oceanic whitetip sharks in Appendix I—meaning that take of oceanic whitetips is now prohibited across its range.

Using the CITES Trade Database, which tracks all reported trade in listed species and landing reports from RFMOs, it would appear that catch and trade in this species has decreased tremendously.³ However, independent studies of fin trimmings purchased in Hong Kong, the global shark fin trade hub and the 2019 updated IUCN assessment found that trade in this species remains about the same as before global management was put in place, and catch of oceanic whitetips has continued to drive declines of 98-100% worldwide. A 2019 stock assessment in the Western and Central Pacific ocean found that these continued catch levels would likely cause oceanic whitetips to go extinct in that region.⁴

Given that almost all catch or retention of oceanic whitetip sharks is illegal, and trade must be legally sourced to continue under CITES, it is likely that all continued trade in the oceanic whitetip is under illegal circumstances. While over half of the trade transits through Hong Kong, these fins are exported from dozens of governments, including the United States as a major global shark catching nation. Additionally, the United States has been found to inadvertently serve as hub for illegal shark fin shipments, which likely include oceanic whitetip fins.⁵ While the United States may not be a consumptive market for oceanic whitetips, its actions/inactions to crack down on the illegal shark fin trade can make a huge difference in the conservation status of this Critically Endangered species and prevent it from going extinct.

³ CITES Trade Database: www.trade.cites.org

Young, C.N., Carlson, J.K. The biology and conservation status of the oceanic whitetip shark (*Carcharhinus longimanus*) and future directions for recovery. *Rev Fish Biol Fisheries* (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11160-020-09601-3>

⁴ Tremblay-Boyer, L., Carvalho, F., Neubauer, P., and Piling, G. 2019. Stock assessment for oceanic whitetip shark in the Western and Central Pacific Ocean. *Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission*. WCPFC-SC15-2019/SA-WP-06.

⁵ <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/2020/02/united-states-facilitating-shark-fin-trade-south-america-asia/>

Question 2: Role of the Species

What is the ecological and/or scientific importance of the species? Note if it is a keystone species and describe its role in its environment. Include references to relevant scientific studies.

Oceanic whitetip sharks are large bodied sharks that are found commonly on the high seas. Once above a certain size, they are one of the top predators in the pelagic environment. They feed opportunistically on a variety of species, largely teleosts and cephalopods.⁶ They play a critical role in linking nutrient exchange between surface and deep water environments. They are slow to grow and late to mature, which means they are easy to overfish, and once overfished it takes a long time for populations to recover.

Question 3: Message

What is the most important message about this species for decision-makers and the public?

At over 98% global declines, we only have a few years left to stop the illegal trade that is driving one of the most iconic shark species to extinction.

Final Selections

If my nomination is selected for inclusion in the report, I would like the first draft of the species profile for the report to be written by (choose one):

You (ESC), and then my NGO will edit the profile and approve the final draft.

Me (my NGO). I understand that I (and other participating writers) will need to adhere to ESC's writing guidelines.

Deadline: May 8, 2020

Send to: top10@endangered.org

⁶ Backus, R.H., Springer, S., & Arnold Jr., E.L. 1956. A contribution to the natural history of the white-tip shark, *Pterolamiops longimanus* (Poey). *Deep-Sea Research*, 3, 176-188.