

# Does the MSC's policy on shark finning have enough bite?

*The Marine Stewardship Council is under pressure to ensure that its ban on shark finning is more thoroughly applied at all levels of certification.*



**WORLD OCEAN INITIATIVE**  
DEC 4TH 2020

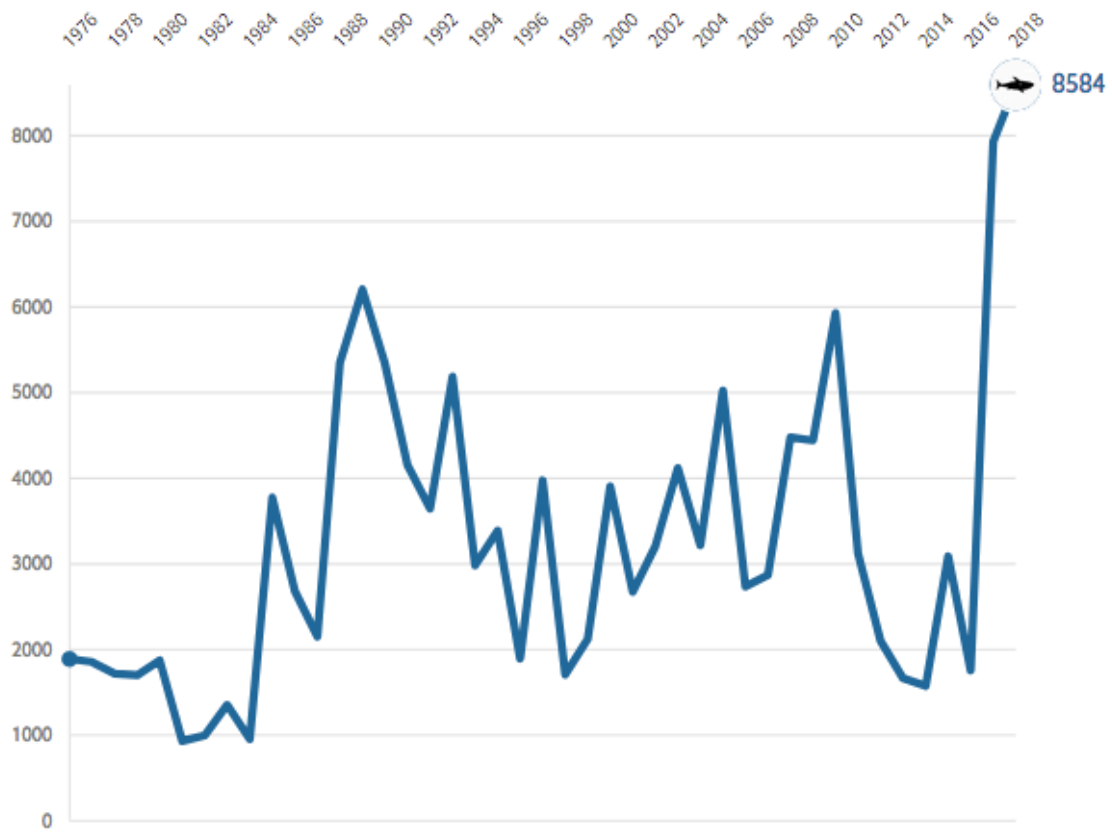


Shark fin soup is regarded as a delicacy and a sign of affluence in many parts of the Far East. But sourcing fins entails removing the fins and tail of a captured shark and discarding the rest back into the sea, leaving the shark to die a slow death. The practice is common among fishers, as fins on their own take up far less space than the whole carcass, making each trip more profitable since more can be caught and stored.

Indeed, shark finning has become big business. A [record seizure by Hong Kong customs officials](#) in May, which included 26 tonnes of fins from endangered species, was valued at around US\$8.6m. In 2018 close to 680,000 tonnes of sharks, rays and chimaeras were captured, and global production of shark fins reached almost 8,600 metric tonnes, according to data from the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO).

# Global production of shark fins (metric tonnes)

Replay

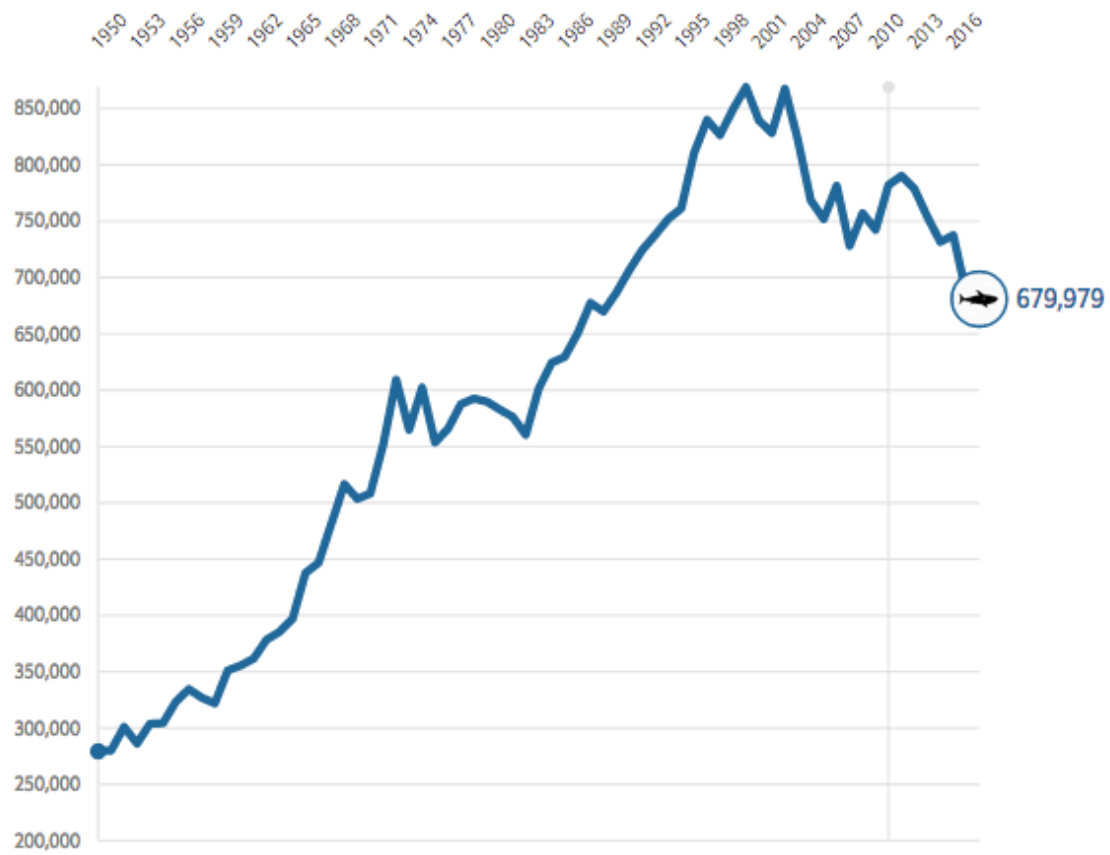


Source: Food and Agriculture Organisation

A Flourish chart

# Global capture production of sharks, rays, and chimaeras 1950-2018, tonnes

Replay



Source: Food and Agriculture Organisation

 A Flourish chart

To curb the practice of shark finning, countries around the world have introduced specific regulations. These vary considerably: while some countries only ban shark finning, [others](#) have broader bans on shark fishing (which includes finning). Partial bans on shark fishing apply to some species, including whale sharks and great white sharks, which are protected under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES).

To reduce the practice of finning where shark fishing is permitted, campaigners and [scientists](#) have advocated for a policy known as Fins Naturally Attached (FNA). Under this policy, fins are left attached to the carcass on board boats, which makes it easier for authorities to identify the shark species and penalise fishers caught with illegal species. FNA is therefore [considered best practice](#) by the International Union for Conservation of Nature to reduce shark finning practices. The FNA policy has been adopted in recent years by countries including Brazil, Chile, India, South Africa, the US and those in the EU.

### **The devil is in the details**

The Marine Stewardship Council's (MSC's) [certification and ecolabel scheme](#) covers 16% of the world's wild fish catch and is marketed to retailers and consumers as the gold standard of sustainable fishing practice. The MSC introduced bans on shark finning from fisheries in its programme in 2011. But despite this ban, FNA is only mandatory in the two higher tiers of the MSC's three certification levels (SG80 and SG100). Fisheries certified to the lowest level of SG60 must meet conditions to raise their performance to SG80 within five years by adopting an FNA policy, or leave the programme.

“It is concerning and disappointing that an organisation considered as a gold standard ecolabel does not have this policy [at all levels of certification], when so many states and management organisations do,” says Frédéric Le Manach, scientific director of [Bloom Association](#). The MSC should not consider the loss of revenue to fisheries caused by FNA policies as a valid reason for not implementing it more widely, since it is supposed to be an ecolabel, not an economic efficiency one, he adds.

MSC has also been [criticised by campaign groups](#) for poorly enforcing the ban on shark finning and consequently failing to prevent finning practices in certified fisheries. In particular they point to the recertification in 2018 of the world’s largest tuna fishery, the Parties to the Nauru Agreement (PNA) in the Pacific Ocean, despite reports of some 429 incidents of shark finning between 2012 and 2015 (each incident can involve the finning of multiple sharks).

“What’s the point of saying that shark finning is banned?” says Mr Le Manach. “Why certify a fishery that massively engages with shark finning? It’s only nice words and speeches, but there’s no enforcement.”

On the Hook, an umbrella organisation including campaign group SHARKPROJECT, Blue Marine Foundation, Bloom Association, several UK MPs and academics from universities in Canada, the UK, US and France, is urging the MSC to make FNA mandatory across all certified fisheries and improve the enforcement of its ban on shark finning.

### **Stepping up**

The MSC acknowledges that, despite the ban, the way its policy on shark finning has been implemented, has allowed the practice to continue. Speaking on the guidance to assessors which was previously issued but removed in September, Tim Davies, the MSC’s head of fisheries standard, states: “Systematic shark finning is not allowed, but isolated incidents effectively [were], as long as they [were] backed up with proper enforcement and sanctions”.

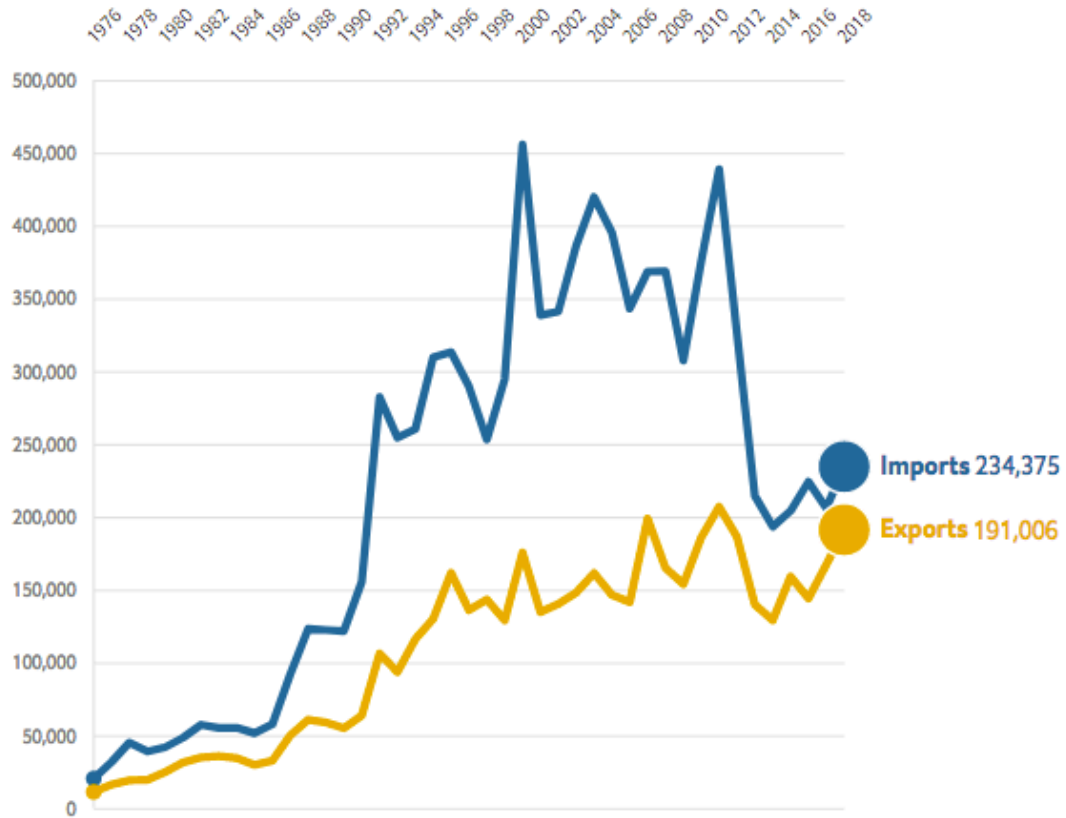
A new rule which came into effect in September means that any ship that is convicted of shark finning will be excluded from the fishery for two years. Vessels [can also have their certificates withdrawn](#) as a result of evidence gathered by independent assessors in the course of the certification process, or following emergency audits of the fishery.

Defending the PNA recertification, Mr Davies explains that isolated incidents of shark finning have been declining in the PNA, with [data](#) from 2017 showing a 99% reduction since 2013, with only three incidents recorded. “Shark finning tends to be one or two bad actors in a fleet, it’s not usually everyone involved, and it’s a bit unfair on those fishers that are meeting the standard to be kicked out of the programme,” Mr Davies says.

That said, as the FAO data above show, the actual production of shark fins has quadrupled since 2016, while the trade in shark fins remains worryingly high.

## Value of shark fins imported and exported globally (US\$1,000)

Replay



Source: Food and Agriculture Organisation

A Flourish chart

Under pressure from campaigners, [the MSC is considering](#) strengthening its requirements on FNA through its five-yearly standards review, which is currently under way. It is reviewing how widely adopted FNA policies are globally. A survey of global fishery management agencies found that 14 out of 25 respondents had the FNA policy in place.

But despite this, the survey also found gaps in enforcement. The MSC has now commissioned a consultant to assess the true extent of FNA implementation globally. Once it has all the evidence, the MSC will consider whether it should insist on FNA for fisheries at the lowest level of certification (SG6o), says Mr Davies.

However, Mr Davies stressed that even if this does not happen, SG6o fisheries can still raise their game quickly. Two of its fisheries managed to put in place measures to essentially eliminate shark finning practices within two years—crew members' contracts stipulated that shark finning was not permitted, and the fisheries opened up channels for whistleblowing, he says.

At the heart of MSC's review is a recognition that FNA policies are an effective way to reduce shark finning. "Whatever we decide, we're not going to be changing the requirement that FNA is required at SG8o level," says Mr Davies. "We recognised when we introduced it that it is the most rigorous way of limiting the opportunity for shark finning to occur, and it gives us the confidence that shark finning doesn't happen on a vessel."

*Editor's note: This article has been updated to reflect the MSC's updated policy on shark finning implemented in September 2020.*