SIGN ON TO SUPPORT OUR CALL FOR SUSTAINABLE DEEP-SEA MANAGEMENT OF SHARKS IN THE EU

Dear Minister [Name],

We write to you as professional marine scientists with expertise in the biology and fisheries of sharks. We urge you to prioritize sustainability considerations and minimize impact on sharks when deciding on catch limits for deep-sea fisheries over the coming two years during this November's Agrifish Council meeting. We call on you to revoke the TACs set in 2016, and instead develop a management plan for all deep-water sharks, rays and chimaeras that are potentially bycaught in EU deep-sea fisheries, including a list of measurable objectives to obtain:

1. Increased data collection;
2. Improved gear selectivity;
3. Avoidance of areas and depths with a known high abundance of deep-sea sharks.

Furthermore, we ask that all endangered deep-sea species be added to the prohibited species list for all EU areas, pending the development of protective management measures to help them recover and rebuild.

Deep-sea sharks are highly vulnerable to human exploitation as a result of extremely slow growth and productivity rates, which are among the lowest observed for any animal species. This limits populations' ability to recover from disturbances, and even a low level of fishing pressure can lead to overexploitation[1]. The International Council for the Exploration of Sea (ICES) advises that fishing mortality of deep-sea sharks should be minimized and no targeted fisheries should be permitted[2].

All legislative partners of the European Community Action Plan for the Conservation and Management of Sharks[3] agreed to the objective 'to ensure that directed fisheries for shark are sustainable and that by-catches of shark resulting from other fisheries are properly regulated'. This plan applies to all cartilaginous fishes (sharks, rays and chimaeras) and we should implement this policy for all deep-sea cartilaginous species that interact with EU fisheries. Currently, only 14 deep-sea cartilaginous species and 1 species group (i.e. deep-water catsharks) are listed as managed under the deep-sea regulation[4], whilst at least 25 species are known to overlap with the area fished. It is currently unclear how the Union can ensure that any catches of these species are sustainably managed.

Moreover, the Council decided in 2016 to set TACs of ten tonnes each in three TAC areas[5] meant to cover unavoidable bycatch in the Portuguese longline fishery for black scabbard fish. This TAC was granted with the explicit objective to facilitate species-specific data gathering on these species. At present, it is not clear how this measure has been implemented.

The extreme biological sensitivity of deep-sea sharks and the very limited knowledge of their abundance and distribution require highly precautionary management strategies coupled with steps to improve data collection. We trust that you will ensure this as the outcome of this November's Agrifish Council meeting.

Sincerely,

References

[1] Norse, Elliott A., Sandra D. Brooke, William W L Cheung, Malcolm R. Clark, Ivar Ekeland, Rainer Froese, Kristina M. Gjerde, Richard L. Haedrich, Selina S. Heppell, Telmo Morato, Lance E. Morgan, Daniel Pauly and Rashid S Sumaila. (2012) Sustainability of deep-sea fisheries. Marine Policy, 36: 307–320.

[2] ICES. 2017. Report of the Working Group on Elasmobranchs (2017), 31 May-7 June 2017, Lisbon, Portugal. ICES CM 2017/ACOM:16. 1018 pp.

[3] Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on a European Community Action Plan for the Conservation and Management of Sharks {SEC(2009) 103} {SEC(2009) 104} {SEC(2009) 106}/* COM/2009/0040 final *

[4] Council Regulation (EU) 2016/2285 of 12 December 2016 fixing for 2017 and 2018 the fishing opportunities for Union fishing vessels for certain deep-sea fish stocks and amending Council Regulation (EU) 2016/72

[5] Union and international waters of 5-9; Union and international waters of 10; Union waters of CECAF 34.1.1, 34.1.2 and 34