

Outlaw Ocean Project: Locals drive Galapagos shark decline, but China bears brunt of blame

The Outlaw Ocean Project wrote that while China has a reputation for illegal fishing, previous accusations that Chinese ships threaten Galapagos sharks were inaccurate. The Latin American industry reacts to those claims

By [Matilde Mereghetti](#) | Oct. 18, 2023 10:13 BST



□ Big turtle, Galapagos islands, Ecuador. Photo: FOTOGRIIN / Shutterstock

China's fishing practices are being unfairly blamed while other countries escape scrutiny for the decline in shark populations near the Galapagos Islands, according to an article by the Outlaw Ocean Project published in [Inside Climate News](#).

However, Latin American industry groups contend regulations have reduced Ecuador's shark catches. Guillermo Moran, director of Ecuador's Tuna Conservation Group, told *Undercurrent News* targeted shark fishing has been banned in Ecuador for 15-16 years, substantially reducing catches.

Transparency concerns remain about China's 400 tuna longline vessels operating in the region without observers, Moran said. Their lack of data makes it hard to estimate the impact on sharks and other bycatch.

The Outlaw Ocean Project investigation found that viral claims in 2020 [about a rising number of Chinese ships threatening Galapagos sharks were inaccurate](#). Those reports followed the [capture by the Ecuadorean navy of a Chinese vessel](#), the Fu Yuan Yu Leng 999, within the Galapagos marine reserve in 2017, with 300 metric tons of marine wildlife, including more than 6,000 sharks.

Ian Urbina, executive director of Outlaw Ocean Project, wrote that the inaccurate claims triggered outrage against China's fleet, already criticized for illegal fishing worldwide. Even US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo lambasted China over the Galapagos. Most Chinese vessels near the islands hunt squid, not sharks, the Outlaw Ocean Project claimed.

Ecuadorean and Peruvian fleets are more responsible for a drastic decline in regional shark populations, according to the article. But the focus on China lets these countries deflect attention, it was claimed.

Hundreds of thousands of shark fins annually transit from Ecuador through Peru to Asia. In June, Oceana, an NGO, [reported a "disturbing" increase](#) in the quantity of shark fins being exported from Peru.

Antonio Torres, a Peruvian official, recently inspected over 300 bags of drying fins near Tumbes, Peru, indicating deliberate targeting of sharks, not accidental bycatch.

According to Jennifer Jacquet, an expert from New York University, Ecuador's shark landings are 3.6 times higher than the UN reports. In 2021, Ecuador set a new export record of 430t of fins.

Ecuador deploys the most fish aggregating devices globally, which attract sharks for easier catching. Local conservationist Manolo Yezep said in Santa Cruz that "we're the ones, not the Chinese, doing all the catching of sharks."

According to the Outlaw Ocean Project, data indicate that most of the shark fins passing through Tumbes come from Ecuador, which in 2007 changed its law to allow fishermen to land and sell fins or meat from sharks caught "incidentally" or by mistake, as "bycatch."

Fishermen can earn up to \$1,000 per kilogram for shark fins sold in East Asia. After being landed in Ecuador, the fins are typically trucked across the border into Peru, which is among the world's largest exporters of the fins, and shipped mostly to Hong Kong and elsewhere in Asia for shark-fin soup, Urbina wrote.

Latin American Industry reactions to these claims

Moran pointed out that there is a significant number of Asian longline fishing vessels registered at the [IATTC \(Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission\) for tuna fishing, particularly from China, with over 400 registered vessels](#).

There are also Japanese, Korean, and Taiwanese vessels, he noted. "These are specialists in tuna longline fishing [where shark is a bycatch]. There is limited information available about those vessels because they have not accepted observers, neither electronic nor human," Moran told *Undercurrent*.

This raises concerns and warrants further discussion, he noted. The Ecuadorian executive stressed that, in contrast, Ecuador has a plan in place for shark conservation and has had regulations for approximately 15 years that prohibit targeted fishing.

They have around 10% observer coverage for smaller artisanal longline fishing fleets. Ecuador is also involved in fisheries improvement projects, which prohibit targeted fishing and the use of materials like wire on longlines, according to Moran. Such regulations should be adopted by all tuna fleets in the IATTC, he noted.

Moran pointed out that countries like China have been resistant to these regulations, improving transparency. "While they have more than 400 large longline vessels, it's important to note that longline vessels typically have lengths between 50 and 70 meters, each capable of deploying up to 4,000 hooks per day," Moran said.

"Unfortunately, due to their lack of transparency, data, and regulations, it's challenging to estimate the true impact of their fisheries, not only on southern albacore but also on incidental catches, particularly of sharks".

Moran said that Ecuador and Peru could not be held solely responsible for these issues. In the case of Ecuador, targeted shark fishing has been banned for approximately 15-16 years, resulting in a substantial shift in their management practices. Ecuador's shark catches, for instance, have reduced from potentially 12,000 to 15,000t in the past to around 6,000t annually due to these regulations, according to Moran.

Tunacons, with the support from the Marine Stewardship Council, are facilitating shark tagging programs, Moran also noted. "These programs focus on releasing live sharks caught incidentally by purse seine fleets, with an emphasis on silky sharks, which constitute a significant portion of incidental catches but a minimal percentage of total catches. This initiative aims to study the survival rates of these sharks after release, with all resulting data being made publicly available," he explained.

Alfonso Miranda, president of the industry association Calamasur, praised the Outlaw Ocean Project's discoveries on forced labor in China, pointing out their investigation was informative and well-documented. He told *Undercurrent* that many of the companies mentioned in the report own or are supplied by the Chinese squid vessels operating in Peru[vian waters] "without proper monitoring and satellite devices, potentially engaging in illicit activities". "The lack of transparency and control raises suspicions about their operations," he noted.

Moranda added that inhuman and forced working conditions and practices in Chinese plants made it hard to compete [for the Latin American industry]. "Competition is welcomed as long as it is fair and on equal terms for all parties involved," he noted.

With regards to the shark fishery in Peru, Miranda underscores the traditional nature of shark fishing in Peru, emphasizing that it is primarily for local consumption rather than the extraction of fins. The population of Peru consumes sharks as a source of food security, and the catching of sharks is intended to meet this need, he said. "There has historically been limited specialization in preserving shark fins, but efforts are being made to train fishermen to make better use of them. It is also emphasized that the sharks caught in Peru, with their fins attached to their bodies, do not pose a risk of overexploitation. This form of fishing is considered ancestral and vital for artisanal fishermen in Peru as a source of income," he said.

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