

## Testimony to Congressional House Oversight Committee regarding HR.1456 “Shark Fin Trade Elimination Act”

Dr. Alistair D.M. Dove, Vice President of Research and Conservation, Georgia Aquarium, 225 Baker Street, Atlanta GA 30313.

Good morning committee members, thank you for the opportunity to give testimony on HR.1456. My name is Dr. Alistair Dove and I am the Vice President of Research and Conservation at Georgia Aquarium in Atlanta, a non-profit organization inspiring awareness and preservation aquatic animals worldwide. I am a broadly experienced marine biologist with a current focus on the biology and conservation of whale sharks and manta rays, which I have been studying around the world for the last ten years.

US shark fisheries are better managed than those of most countries and, for some species at least, even meet the definition of being sustainable over the long term. In relative terms, though, it is not an especially high value fishery. In 2015 US shark landings were worth 6.6 million dollars, over 4.2 million of which was from spiny dogfish, a small and sustainably fished coastal shark species of little interest in the shark fin trade. Compare that to \$460M dollars annually for salmon, or \$678M for crabs. Sharks make up just 0.12% of the value of all US fisheries (NOAA Fisheries data) and the fins make up less than a quarter of that tiny fraction (Hueter & Shiffman). I imagine more money may be spent publicly debating and legislating this bill than the annual value of the fishery to which it relates, which is roughly 1 million dollars.

The issues of shark fins and shark finning are surprisingly complex, with aspects of biology, conservation, economics, fisheries management and culture that are both domestic and international. The barbaric practice of “finning” sharks at sea and returning their carcasses to the ocean has rightly been outlawed in the US since the 1990’s, as it is in many countries, but not all. The Shark Conservation Act of 2010 sought to close loopholes in the earlier legislation, while the bill currently before the house seeks to outlaw the trade of shark fins in the US altogether and I support this proposal.

We need healthy oceans because they provide half the oxygen we breathe, protein for billions of people daily, a buffer against climate change and a means to conduct more than 90% of international commerce. And a healthy ocean needs healthy shark populations. An ocean without sharks is like a sky without eagles or the Serengeti without lions. Many of the nearly 500 species of sharks qualify as top level predators and have important roles to play in maintaining diversity in the marine ecosystem. Science has repeatedly shown that removal of sharks can cause a domino effect with significant impacts on the rest of the food web. In addition to their ecosystem roles, there is a growing and vibrant social movement to regard sharks as *bona fide* charismatic species, worthy of every bit as much of our concern and protection as elephants, pandas or the California condor.

If finning is already illegal, why then do we need a blanket ban on trade in shark fins? There are three key reasons. First, because in practical terms, it is impossible to determine the origins of a fin once it has been removed from a shark. Shark fins are both exported and imported in the US, and without complete traceability, you cannot know whether a given fin was harvested in the US from one of our handful of sustainable fisheries, or imported from another country which does not have restrictions on finning at sea. Second, because it can be very difficult to know the species from which a given shark fin was removed. So, even if we

have sustainably fished sharks that can supply fins into the trade, it would be possible to launder the fins of other unsustainable species into the mix. And at up to \$500 a pound, the incentive to cheat the system is significant. Third and most importantly, because we should set an example by discouraging practices that perpetuate the market demand for shark fins in the first place. Groups like WildAid have had some success in public awareness campaigns in China about shark conservation, and even the Chinese central government has forbidden the serving of shark fin soup at official functions nationwide, although that was as much about government austerity as anything else. Regardless, these efforts have resulted in a drop in consumption of over 80% since 2014 (Jeffries). So even if US fisheries can provide a sustainable shark fins, doing so encourages a practice that is certainly not sustainable elsewhere and is in decline anyway.

Sharks are more valuable alive for the ecosystem services they provide, or as the target of wildlife tourism. A recent analysis published by Oceana showed that 1 in 5 SCUBA diving trips in Florida was specifically targeted at sharks, contributing 126 million dollars to the economy and supporting 3,800 jobs in that state alone – nineteen times more than the commercial value of all US shark landings. Aspiring to sustainable shark fin fisheries doesn't make economic sense compared to the recurring value these species have for tourism. You can only cut the fins off a dead shark once, but you can sell the chance to see a live one over and over as long as it lives, and sharks can live a long time.

In summary, market demand for shark fins has historically provided powerful incentive for overharvesting. Even if some US species could theoretically support sustainable shark fin fisheries, doing so perpetuates a practice that is losing popularity in China, and these species would have more ecological and economic value if they were left in the ocean. My 5 year old daughter put it succinctly that "People shouldn't cut sharks fins off; they should leave sharks in the ocean so everyone can see how awesome they are".