

Ecuador: Loopholes Fuel Ecuador's Shark Fin Trade

When Ecuador President Guillermo Lasso announced the expansion of a marine reserve around the Galapagos Islands, he described the journey of a juvenile whale shark named “Esperanza,” or “Hope.”

Using a satellite tagging system, investigators had monitored the 10-foot female shark for nearly eight months. Then, silence.

“Her course intersected with a foreign fleet fishing on the border of Ecuador’s protected waters,” Lasso said in a January opinion piece for conservation news outlet [Mongabay](#), in which he described the reserve, where shark fishing is banned.

A cruel irony undercuts Lasso’s tale of Esperanza. Despite raising alarms about illegal fishing, Ecuador remains a hotspot for landing massive amounts of shark catch, and the nation is among the world’s biggest exporters of shark fins.

While the country prohibits the deliberate fishing of sharks, hundreds of thousands are harvested each year as bycatch. Ecuador’s laws place no limit on such “incidental catch,” and the valuable fins can be legally sold and exported.

“In the end, it is a legal loophole,” Alex Hearn, a professor at Universidad San Francisco de Quito who had been part of the team monitoring Esperanza, told InSight Crime.

Last year, Ecuador exported a record amount of shark fins. In 2021, its central bank [recorded nearly](#) 321 metric tons of exports, nearly quadruple some 90 tons exported in 2020. Revenues from shark fin also have shot up, from \$647,000 in 2013 to \$9.7 million in 2021.

The Ecuador government is “flirting dangerously with the concept that fin export is a good source of income,” said Cristina Cely, an environmental activist focused on ocean conservation in Ecuador.

Nets and Longlines

Shark fishing was banned in Ecuador in 2004. But three years later, then-President Rafael Correa [signed executive decree](#) 486, which allowed the sale of some types of shark bycatch.

Some 280,000 sharks are harvested each year in Ecuador’s waters, according to congressman Washington Varela, [who spoke](#) to legislators in September 2021 as the president of the National Assembly’s Biodiversity Commission.

Ecuador’s fishing fleet, composed of artisanal and industrial vessels, employs two fishing methods that catch sharks: large nets and longlines.

More than 100 industrial tuna boats employ nets that bring in hauls of up to 700 tons of marine life from the deep. An investigation by [Mongabay revealed](#) that the tuna fleet took in a record

haul of silky sharks in 2015, while more than 63,000 silky sharks, which are listed as [near threatened](#) by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), were caught between 2014 and 2018.

Worse yet is the uncontrolled use of longline fishing gear, whose miles of baited hooks decimate shark populations. Some 20 percent of Ecuador's fishing boats, both industrial and artisanal, [use long lines](#) or *palangrera*.

The most destructive fleets active in Ecuador waters are *nodriza*, consisting of a mothership and up to a dozen towed fiberglass skiffs. These fleets, which can stay out to sea for three weeks, set thousands of hooks on lines attached to buoys. According to Pablo Guerrero, director of marine conservation for World Wildlife Fund-Ecuador (WWF), the *nodriza* fleets comprise a total of about 200 motherships and 3,000 skiffs.

When waters turn cold, the vessels deploy large hooks in deep waters to catch tuna. "Because of the cold water, there are more incidents with sharks," Guerrero told InSight Crime.

Oswaldo Rosero, a fisheries and maritime consultant in Ecuador, said vessels using longline gear can set hooks to be "very predatory."

Such boats have also been involved in illegal activities, such as drug running. In September 2021, Ecuador's coast guard stopped a large fishing vessel near the Galapagos marine reserve with a half-ton of drugs onboard. Eighty-two of the 90 dead fish onboard were sharks.

"It's absurd to have 90 percent of the haul consisting of shark," Rosero told InSight Crime.

The Fin Trade

In 2021, Ecuador accounted for 6.3 percent of the world's shark fin exports, up from 1.6 percent in 2016, [according to Abrams](#). Last year, a bill [proposing a one-year moratorium](#) on shark fishing and a four-year ban on shark exports was put before legislators, but it was [not approved](#).

Shark bycatch export is mainly composed of five species. Four of them – pelagic threshers, bigeye threshers, shortfin mako sharks and silky sharks – are protected by the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species ([CITES](#)), an international agreement that regulates the wildlife trade.

Permits are required to export shark products. But enforcement is lacking, and fines are minimal. In 2020, an exporter of 26 tons of [shark fin made a brazen attempt](#) to obtain a retroactive CITES permit from Ecuador's Ministry of the Environment, Water and Ecological Transition (Ministerio del Ambiente, Agua y Transición Ecológica – MAATE) after the shipment was seized in Hong Kong. The exporter was fined just \$3,800 for the illegal shipment, which authorities estimated to be worth \$1.1 million.

"In Ecuador, it is better to commit illegal acts, be punished, and to continue with your illegal activity because it is cheaper," said Cely, the environmental activist.

Of nearly 320 tons of shark fins exported from Ecuador between 2013 and 2016, nearly all were sent to Hong Kong and Spain, according to Ecuador's central bank. Shark fin exports, though, shifted sharply to Peru the following year. During the past five years, almost all 755 tons of shark fins exported from Ecuador went to the neighboring country.

Fernando Rey, a coastal marine officer for WWF in Ecuador, said shipping companies have refused to transport shark fins directly from Ecuador, so most go through Peru and then are sent to countries in Asia.

Smuggling and [laundering opportunities](#) abound at the Ecuador-Peru border. Falsified permits are used. Shark fins are labeled as other seafood products. Quotas are exceeded. Fins of all kinds, including from protected species such as hammerhead sharks, are mixed.

Traffickers know the weaknesses in the fishing and border controls, according to Rey. They use laundering strategies to “legalize fins and then export them,” he said.

In the port city of Manta, Cely said she saw firsthand the bloody business of finning. The smell of dead shark, she recalled, became more potent as carcasses were piled up “one after the other.”

Ecuador's government contradicts itself by prohibiting shark fishing in the Galapagos Islands marine reserve, while these same sharks migrate to waters where they are then fished by local fleets and stripped of their fins at ports, Cely said.

“Sharks are wildlife in the Galapagos, but once they leave the Galapagos, we have to see them as a cash cow,” she said. The “vision of them shouldn't change” based on geography.

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Assessment



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