



# Randall Arauz: The War for Sharks

Text by Ila France Porcher

Biologist Randall Arauz has worked for nearly 30 years for the protection of the marine life off the shores of Central America and his native Costa Rica.



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In 1997, sea turtles were highly endangered by the rampant international trade in their parts and as part of his effort to protect them, Arauz founded the Association for the Restoration of Sea Turtles (PRETOMA). The organisation soon captured footage of high numbers of sharks being finned and filmed a Taiwanese vessel bearing 30 tons of fins at a private dock under the cover of night. The electrifying footage stirred Costa Ricans and the international community, and jump-started Arauz's war to put an end to the shark fin trade in his beleaguered nation.

The shark fin racket began in the 1970s as a result of increasing demand by the rapidly-growing, wealthy Asian countries, called *tiger economies*. By the 1990s, Costa Rica had become one of the world's most prominent locations for the slaughter of sharks.

It was during those years that the shark highway up the western coast of Central and North America was being fished out. Costa Rica, ideally placed as a rallying point for the Taiwanese mafia, became a major cargo-unloading point for international factory fishing and shark finning fleets. Rob Stewart's film *Sharkwater*, documented an incident that revealed the depth of the problem in the country, which also has a huge long-line fleet of its own.

Arauz, who was voted one of the planet's 100 Angels in 2003 for his work for nature, has been an Angel at war ever

since as he used every means at his disposal to try to gain protection for sharks. He alerted Costa Ricans to the slaughter that was ongoing in their waters, filed lawsuits against the government, and organised educational campaigns, petitions and collaboration with international shark conservation organisations.

In 2010, he was awarded the Goldman Environmental Prize for leading the campaign to halt shark finning in Costa Rica, making his country a leader in shark protection. He was also awarded the Gothenburg Award for Sustainable Development. That same year, he founded the Rescue Center for Endangered Marine Species (CREMA), a Costa Rican NGO with the goal of "halting the extinction of highly migratory species in the eastern tropical Pacific."

But Costa Rica has not been consistent in its efforts to protect sharks. Though the nation has an international reputation of being environmentally conscious, the shark finning market yields profits nearly as high as that of the illegal drug trade, and the current government puts commercial interest first and will not protect

Finned hammerhead shark (left); The "fins attached" requirement in Costa Rica, which says that a shark's fins must stay attached to the animal, resulted in fishermen bringing in the fins attached to just the spine (below); Shark fin identification chart (center); Randall Arauz (bottom right) is pressuring the Costa Rican Fisheries and Aquaculture Institute to publicly destroy fins.



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Laura Chinchilla, led the international campaign to have three species of hammerhead sharks listed in Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). In a celebrated move that

made Costa Rica a global leader in marine conservation, it banned the export of hammerhead sharks and their parts.

However, there was a change in government and the gains that had been made were overturned. Costa Rica's support for listing more species of sharks in CITES ended, and it refused to support proposals to grant Appendix II listings for silky and thresher sharks. Furthermore, the administration under the former president, Luis Guillermo Solís, permitted the shark fin industry to continue fishing for hammerhead sharks without restrictions. Ten tons of endangered hammerhead shark fins are now stockpiled in the port city of Puntarenas, and are awaiting export when the ban is lifted.

Arauz states that fins taken during an export ban should always be illegal to export and is pressuring the Costa Rican Institute for Fisheries and Aquaculture (INCOPECA) to publicly destroy the fins. A petition supporting this may be found at this link: <https://www.change.org/p/costa-rica-don-t-export-that-stockpile-of-hammerhead-shark-fins>.

According to CITES, a positive "non-detrimental finding" is needed before the fins can be exported, and two inde-

any shark species that bring in a profit. Nor will it enforce the laws already in place to protect the marine environment, but permits the use of a variety of loopholes that serve to enable the shark finning racket.

### Hammerhead duplicity

In 2013, Arauz, working with President



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# profile

Divers with hammerhead shark



pendent scientific studies have confirmed that it will be detrimental to the hammerhead shark to resume the exportation of its parts. Thus, it remains illegal to export the fins. But the authorities continue to allow fishermen to catch them, land the sharks and stockpile the fins while working on getting the non-detrimental finding changed in such a way that it will be retroactive. Then, the fins may be exported in spite of being taken at a time when their export was illegal.

The situation violates the CITES listing which was intended to protect an endangered species. The problem is that while the Appendix II listing bans export, it still permits the

endangered species to be caught and killed.

Arauz explained, "The bottom line is that working as hard and as extensively as we have been here in Costa Rica, we have not had an impact on hammerhead shark mortality." He explained that sharks are the main target of Costa Rican fisheries, and with the price of fins as high as it is, a variety of loopholes are exploited to profit from them.

For example, the "fins attached" requirement, which specifies that a shark's fins must remain attached to the animal, resulted in fishermen bringing in the fins attached to just the spine. In other cases, fisheries licenced for other

species may still bring in sharks and declare them as incidental catch. The mahi mahi season, for example, only lasts for four or five months, yet a mahi mahi fishery catches sharks all year around and claims them to be "incidental." But when sharks comprise 80 or 90 percent of the catch, it is actually a shark-targeted fishery posing as a mahi mahi fishery.

Arauz is working for more protection for hammerhead sharks since they are already listed on CITES and are banned from international commerce. He has launched a court case concerning the stockpiling of their fins and is trying to get a court order to ban the landing of hammerhead

sharks.

But he has become disappointed with the whole CITES approach, which requires each species to be listed separately, while the shark finning fleets take them all. Furthermore, his efforts are now being fought by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), which opposes such listings. Though an Appendix II listing provides very little protection to a species, even that is extremely difficult to get. The FAO is a huge power to fight.

### Small-scale fisheries

Costa Rican small-scale fisheries support thousands of Costa Rican families who depend upon the health of its coastal waters. These fishers still remember how good the fishing was in the 1980s, and report that now, in spite of a much

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Silky shark (left and bottom right); Arauz (below) has been working on getting the protected area around Cocos Island National Park enlarged to a rectangular area of 4,000 sq mi.

### Ending long-line fishing

There is currently an initiative from the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission's (IATTC) Scientific Committee that recommends a long-line closure in the eastern Pacific Ocean for three months. Based on his own published study of long-lining, Arauz found that a six-month closure is needed, but was glad to accept three months. But the closure has been discussed at meetings for three years in a row, and Costa Rica always blocks it.

"Imagine," Arauz said, "a three-month closure of all long-line fishing in

degree of protection and Arauz has a lot of support from the people of El Salvador and Guatemala where he and his colleagues have been going for years to do sea turtle work and train activists. But they have not been able to have any effect on putting policies in place. "It's really tough in those countries," he said.

### Cocos Island's birthday

Cocos Island National Park, which is also recognised as a United Nations World Heritage Site, turned 40 years old on 22 June. The island has a 12-mile no-take zone around it, and for the last four years,

Arauz has been working on getting the protected area enlarged to a rectangular area of 4,000 square miles. He and his colleagues have been negotiating how to protect it and working with the fishermen, with the intention of having it included in the park to increase its area of protection. Other nations that have been hard hit by the shark fin racket—including Brazil, Easter Island and the Galapagos—are working on establishing and increas-

ing their marine protected areas (MPAs); it is the next step to take.

"What I want to see is fewer dead sharks," Arauz said, as he described this new campaign. "Let's take areas away from the fishermen."

Arauz wants total protection from international commerce for sharks and their parts, and to find a way to reduce the power and extent of fisheries. It is well known that factory fishing not only takes away the fish on which the small-scale fisher depends, but also drives up the price to export prices, so that the local people lose out in two ways.

In the meantime, he continues to fight for sharks, to try to get more species listed by CITES, and to make the CITES regulations work. For now, they are the only tool he has. Arauz remembers that, like sharks, sea turtles were once threatened, but were brought back from extinction's horizon through global conservation efforts and an international ban on their trade. He still dreams of such protection for sharks. And perhaps through the sheer power of his efforts and influence, and in spite of all corruption and opposition, the deadly trade in shark fins will finally be repulsed from the shores of Costa Rica and forced into retreat. ■



PHOTO COURTESY OF RANDALL ARAUZ

greater investment of effort, they can scarcely make ends meet.

The depletion of fish stocks is partly responsible for the large consumption of sharks for meat all over Central America, which began in the '80s. Before then, in Costa Rica and other South American countries, sharks were considered a bad type of fish and they were not targeted—no one ate shark. But under the influence of the shark fin trade, all that changed. Now, Costa Ricans alone are consuming about 2,000 tons of shark meat a year.

Arauz did a study to determine how much the long-line fishery had declined and found that not only had the mahi mahi fishery declined but so have the numbers of silky sharks, which is the one mostly caught by local fishers.

To help restore the health of the coastal waters, Arauz filed a lawsuit against the shrimp trawling industry, which was responsible for much of the destruction. Trawlers are fishing vessels that drag a weighted net over the bottom and effectively destroy the intricate and delicate habitat of the sea floor. The trawlers invade hammerhead nurseries and the pupping grounds of rays and silky sharks.

### Shrimp trawling banned

The lawsuit succeeded and shrimp trawling was banned. The problem with the commons, Arauz explained, is that it is everybody's and nobody's. Though Costa Rican fishermen understood the need to protect the reef, as long as the shrimp trawlers were coming through and killing everything no matter what they did, they were reluctant to cooperate in protecting it. Now that shrimp trawling has been stopped, progress is being made through helping the fishers to protect their reef.

But now, the FAO is supporting the Costa Rican government in an effort to get shrimp trawling restarted, and Arauz has had to fight them for the past three years. The FAO has actually begun funding the Costa Rican government to do studies to try to make shrimp trawling sustainable.

the eastern tropical Pacific. Imagine everything that would be saved." Costa Rica got a new president in May and Arauz hopes that he will help this to come about. He will be meeting with the IATTC again, hoping to find a way to make the long-lining closure a reality.

Many sharks travel widely, including in adjacent countries where they are not protected. Panama has some

