

Testimony of Vance Kondon
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Before the
Subcommittee on Water, Power and Oceans
House Committee on Natural Resources

On
H.R. 1456
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Introduction

Good morning, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify before you today on H.R. 1456 – the Shark Fin Sales Elimination Act.

My name is Vance Kondon, and I am originally from San Diego, California, where I grew up just several blocks from the ocean, and where I spent much of my free time surfing, skin diving and fishing. It was in this time in my youth that I came to love and appreciate the wonder of the ocean and its inhabitants. After high school, I joined the military and served our great nation for 30 years, with my final assignment at Joint Base Andrews, Maryland, just a short distance from the Capital, before retiring just coming up on about two years ago. During my years of service, I had the opportunity to travel and live in parts of the world where I was able to spend time in the ocean and pursue training in scuba diving, beginning in 1987 in Guam. I completed training as a divemaster in 1999 and assisted in training other divers while stationed in Honduras from 2004 to 2008. After retiring from the Air Force in 2016, I completed my scuba instructor certification and have since been serving in a management role and instructor at Rainbow Reef Dive Center in Key Largo, Florida, which is the largest dive operator in the Florida Keys and one of the busiest diving training centers in the Western Hemisphere.

Sharks and Tourism

Science has proven time and time again that sharks play important roles in ocean ecosystems around the world. But it may not be as well known that sharks play important roles in ocean-based tourism economies, including here in the United States. There have been a number of scientific studies that show shark-watchers spend hundreds of millions of dollars on shark ecotourism every year around the world, and that number is growing.¹

¹ Cisneros-Montemayor, Andres M., Michele Barnes-Mauthe, Dalal Al-Abdulrazzak, Estrella Navarro-Holm, and U. Rashid Sumaila. "Global Economic Value of Shark Ecotourism: Implications for Conservation." *Oryx* 47, no. 3 (July 2013): 381-88. doi:10.1017/S0030605312001718.

In 2017, an independent study commissioned by Oceana found that direct expenditures for shark encounters in the diving industry totaled over \$221 million and fueled over 3,700 jobs in Florida, mine included.²

These numbers may seem large, but I can tell you from firsthand experience that people in Florida love to see sharks. Though there is never truly a slow dive season for us in Key Largo, during the peak summer season, from the end of May through October, at Rainbow Reef alone, we will take anywhere from 750 to 1,000 customers out to Key Largo's reefs each week. Most of those customers want to see the bigger aquatic life when we take them out: turtles, rays, and most importantly, sharks. Our guests come from all over the world because Key Largo has an incredible reputation of being "The Dive Capital of the World," so they come with an expectation that the reefs and reef life, including sharks, will be in abundance. Unfortunately, we have to let guests know that we only occasionally see sharks, and that we'll do our best to take them to locations where they may see them, because it is not something that happens as often as we would like.

Sharks In Trouble

One reason this happens is because the dive tourism industry is being threatened by the demand for shark fins - one of the greatest threats to sharks around the world. This demand has driven some populations of sharks to ever lower numbers, which hurts dive businesses across the United States.

In Key Largo, we see nurse sharks most often, but not on every dive trip. Sadly, it has become much more rare to sight the Caribbean reef sharks that we used to see more of in the past. When we are really lucky, which is only a few times a year, we see one or two hammerhead sharks on our reefs. Hammerhead sharks have suffered immensely from the fin trade and, currently fetch some of the highest prices for their fins. In the eastern Gulf of Mexico, the average price for a hammerhead fin is \$15.95 per pound. This stands in stark contrast with the meat from this same shark, which only is worth about \$0.25 per pound.³ Additionally, scalloped hammerheads in the Atlantic are considered overfished and are experiencing overfishing, while the smooth and great hammerheads do not have species-specific stock assessments – the basis of any sustainably managed fishery.⁴ As dive professionals, it is hard for us to see shark populations suffer due to the fin trade because we love to see the sharks alive and swimming in our reefs. This also means we are not able to share that experience with our guests as often as we'd like, which would be on every dive trip if it were possible!

Shark finning, the act of slicing the fin off a shark and dumping the body back into the ocean, is a gruesome result of the demand for shark fins. While finning is illegal in the United States, it still occurs. In fact, almost exactly one year ago, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation

² <http://usa.oceana.org/press-releases/new-report-finds-shark-related-diving-generated-over-221-million-florida-2016>

³ <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2017/11/22/2017-25203/atlantic-highly-migratory-species-2018-atlantic-shark-commercial-fishing-season>

⁴ <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/national/population-assessments/fishery-stock-status-updates>

Commission officers stopped a Key West shrimp boat that had been illegally finning in U.S. waters – a mere 20 miles north of the island.⁵

This is not the only time this has happened in recent years. An inquiry from Senator Booker’s office revealed that since January 1, 2010, NOAA has investigated 85 incidents involving alleged shark finning. 26 of those investigations have resulted in charges.

In 2012, the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries caught two men with 11 whole sharks and 2,073 shark fins, taken from another 518 fish. They were ordered to pay a \$45,000 fine to NOAA.⁶

In January 2017, divers in West Palm Beach encountered dead sharks missing fins on one of their dives.⁷

I, myself, have seen evidence of this horrible act in U.S. waters. Just last year, on one of our deep wreck sites in Key Largo, we were horrified to find several sharks that were finned and dumped to die in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary. Unfortunately, we arrived likely long after the sharks were finned and dumped, as there were no other boats in the area of the dive site and the sharks were already deceased.

It is impossible to tell whether a fin has been cut off of a shark legally or illegally once it is detached from the body. It’s not impossible that the fins from the sharks I saw that day may have ended up in a bowl of soup served here in the U.S.

Shark Fin Imports

Things get even more complicated when shark fin imports are brought into the mix. The U.S. has deemed finning illegal due to the cruel and wasteful nature of the practice. However, I was shocked to learn that we are actively importing shark fins from countries that do not have the same protections in place.

Miami, a city close in proximity to the dive businesses that are thriving due to sharks, is importing shark fins from Hong Kong yearly. In fact, Miami has been the #1 importer of shark fins from Hong Kong since 2015.⁸

This is a problem because a recent study showed that fewer than 10 species in the Hong Kong fin trade have sustainably managed fisheries anywhere in their range, and nearly one-third were considered vulnerable or endangered by the International Union for Conservation of Nature.⁹

⁵ <http://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/environment/article142029049.html>

⁶ http://www.nola.com/outdoors/index.ssf/2016/02/fishermen_plead_guilty_after_f.html

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vcYJRUsR7jw>

⁸ https://www.st.nmfs.noaa.gov/pls/webpls/trade_allstrct_byproduct.results?qttype=IMP&qyearfrom=2010&qyear=2018&qproduct=SHARK&qsort=DISTRICT&qoutput=TABLE

⁹ Fields, A. T., Fischer, G. A., Shea, S. K., Zhang, H., Abercrombie, D. L., Feldheim, K. A., ... & Chapman, D. D. (2017). Species composition of the international shark fin trade assessed through a retail-market survey in Hong Kong. *Conservation Biology*.

We cannot continue to participate in this trade that is decimating shark populations around the world.

Shark Fin Sales Elimination Act

There is a simple solution to this problem – to end the demand for shark fins in the United States, and to ensure that any fin, even if illegally obtained, cannot be sold here.

The Shark Fin Sales Elimination Act (H.R. 1456) would do exactly that.

Already, 12 states have banned the sale and trade of shark fins and they are not alone. They join 40 airlines, 20 major shipping companies, and seven large corporations. Fifty-one percent of international airlines now have banned shark fins, based on seat capacity. Worldwide, 17 of the 19 biggest shipping lines measured by container capacity have banned shark fins, impacting 71 percent of the global market.¹⁰ Support for this act is overwhelming – 8 in 10 Americans support a fin ban, as do 9 aquariums, multiple recreational fishing interests, over 150 chefs, 150 scientists, 85 surfers, surf businesses and surf publications, and over 500 U.S. businesses and organizations, including mine.

The world is moving towards ending the shark fin trade, and the United States has an opportunity to be a leader. This opportunity should not be wasted.

¹⁰ <http://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/economy/article/2089229/chinas-biggest-airline-bans-shark-fin-cargo>