



SIGNIFICANT PROGRESS MADE AT NAFO ANNUAL MEETING TO PROTECT VULNERABLE GREENLAND SHARKS AND DEEP SEA ECOSYSTEMS

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Press Release - For Immediate Release

Groundbreaking agreement on ecosystem approach to fisheries & prohibition on keeping ‘bycatch’ of Greenland shark agreed by Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organization. Full closure of vulnerable marine ecosystems to damage from trawling is still required.

At its 44th Annual Meeting held in Porto, Portugal, the Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organization (NAFO) made significant progress in agreeing new fisheries science and management measures. This meeting was the first in person annual meeting since 2019, and the Deep Sea Conservation (DSCC) attended as an observer.

Following over a decade of analysis by NAFO Scientific Council, Contracting Parties agreed that scientific advice should include an ecosystem indicator above which there is concern regarding overall catch levels and authorized the continuation of an ecosystem approach to fisheries to inform management decisions in the future. In addition, NAFO agreed to a prohibition on the retention of Greenland sharks, the longest-living shark in the world, within international waters of the Northwest Atlantic.

“NAFO has often been on the leading edge of fisheries management measures in international waters,” said Matthew Gianni, Policy Advisor to the DSCC. Gianni commented: *“We are hopeful that NAFO’s work to adopt an ecosystem threshold is the start of a new era of fisheries management that takes into account ecosystem dynamics and the impact of fishing on the environment as a whole, and not just setting quotas for the catch of individual fish stocks that could be considered sustainable.”*

The retention measure for Greenland sharks, which can live for up to 400 years, was first advised by NAFO’s Scientific Council in 2018 and finally adopted this year with support by all member countries. However, exemptions may be made where domestic rules ban discarding dead sharks. Continued work is needed to ensure that any bycatch is recorded and that all sharks caught are properly handled to give them the best chance to survive when released back into the ocean.

In 2021, NAFO became the first international fisheries management organization to protect all seamounts and related features from bottom fishing. The United Nations General Assembly in November of this year will review the actions taken by NAFO and other regional high seas fisheries organizations to protect seamounts and other biologically rich deep-sea

ecosystems. *“When countries agree to this type of conservation measure in one part of the world, it is imperative that those same countries agree to do the same in other high seas regions”* says Matthew Gianni. Gianni added: *“Seamounts are recognized as biodiversity hotspots and we are hoping to see further seamount protections at the Northeast Atlantic Fisheries Commission later this year and in the North and South Pacific in 2023.”*

Concerns were raised at NAFO about the impacts of other activities in areas that NAFO has closed to fishing to protect deep-sea corals, sponges and other habitats easily damaged by trawling. Drilling for oil and gas is scheduled to begin in 2028 in some of these sites. For fisheries closures to be considered effective biodiversity protection measures, other impactful industrial activities should avoid these areas.

NAFO generally followed scientific advice on fishing quotas, but quotas for some stocks continued to be set well above recent catch levels. On cod on the Flemish Cap in the NAFO area, in spite of scientific advice that the cod stock is once again in decline and the reservations by a number of countries including Canada, UK, US and Norway, the quota was set above the science advice of 5791T, at 6100T. Cod is an iconic species but has been fished for hundreds of years, and heavily overfished in the past several decades.

Much work still remains on protecting deep-sea habitats formed by sponges, coldwater corals and other species vulnerable to bottom trawl impacts on the Grand Banks and Flemish Cap. A number of such areas identified by the Scientific Council of NAFO have only been partially closed to fishing. Consideration of additional closures is scheduled for next year's meeting of NAFO. The DSCC urged member countries this week to agree to fully close these areas at the 2023 meeting to ensure effective protection of these habitats. Prohibiting research trawls within closed areas remains unresolved, with further discussions scheduled for fall 2022 as part of the Scientific Council.

“Our ocean is under tremendous pressure from overfishing, climate change impacts, plastics and pollution as well as emerging threats, such as deep-sea mining. Countries have recognized the urgency and committed to halting and reversing biodiversity loss in the marine environment. The closure of seamounts to bottom fishing last year by NAFO and the measures adopted at this week's meeting are concrete steps in the right direction.” said Matthew Gianni.

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