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18 December 2008

The Hon Peter Garrett MP  
Minister for the Environment, Heritage and the Arts  
PO Box 6022  
Parliament House  
Canberra  
ACT 2600

Dear Minister,

**Re: The threats to sharks, the NSW shark fishery and the Nature Conservation Council of NSW shark campaign**

We are writing to you regarding our serious concerns about the conservation status of sharks and the threats they face in NSW waters and beyond.

Sharks are threatened with extinction all over the world. Scientists estimate that populations of large predatory fish, including sharks, have declined by 90% since before industrial fishing began in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In Australia, there is little reason to suppose that this decline has not been mirrored. Records from the NSW beach meshing program show a marked decline in catches of sharks of all species since the nets were introduced.

The decline in shark numbers can be directly linked to the increasing popularity of shark fin soup in Asia. The high prices fetched for shark fins have resulted in a huge expansion of targeted shark fishing worldwide and the increased catches have been reflected in the 2008 edition of the IUCN Red List of threatened species. Several previously unthreatened or near threatened species are now classified as endangered and facing a very high risk of extinction.

Against this backdrop of extremely low population numbers and declining abundance trends, the shark fishery in NSW has been allowed to expand. One of the most heavily fished groups of sharks in NSW is Whaler sharks. Catches of the several species in this group rose from an average of 165 tonnes per year to 440 tonnes in 2006/07. Each species of Whaler shark and every other commercially targeted shark in NSW, appears on the IUCN Red List or is classified as 'Near Threatened' (likely to be on the Red List in the near future).

It is universally accepted by scientists that sharks are notoriously vulnerable to over-exploitation as they are slow growing, late to mature and produce few young. Even the most fecund of shark species produce very few young when compared to other fish and their reproductive rates have more in common with mammals than fish. Much of the world once realised that hunting marine mammals such as whales is incredibly difficult to do in a sustainable manner and the resulting moratorium almost certainly saved several whale species from extinction. The same is not yet true of sharks but the warning signs have been there for some time and urgent action is required if extinctions are to be avoided.

With the accepted vulnerability of sharks to fishing, the documented decline in numbers throughout the world and, more particularly, in NSW, it seems incredible that the fishery has expanded. To compound this failure in management by the State government, there has been next to no research directed at shark populations and movements in NSW, nor does the government intend to release funds to initiate any such research. Instead, the NSW Department of Primary Industries has adopted a 'wait and see' policy with some of the ocean's most vulnerable and endangered species.

As a result of our deep concerns over the ongoing irresponsible exploitation of these keystone species, the Nature Conservation Council of NSW is launching a campaign to raise awareness about the immediate threats posed to sharks as a result of the expanded shark fin fishery in NSW (for although Australian regulations prohibit finning at sea, the fishery exists purely because of the fins).

The major fishery responsible for the unsustainable shark catches in NSW is the Ocean Trap and Line Fishery (OTLF), for which a decision on the status of the export licence under the EPBC Act is due in July 2009. Given the lack of scientific assessment of the shark component in this fishery and the concerns mentioned above the Nature Conservation Council is of the strong opinion that this export licence should not be reissued. The precedent for this course of action is the WA Joint Authority Shark Fishery, which had its WTO licence revoked following concerns about the impacts that fishery was having on Sandbar sharks.

We write this letter in anticipation of meeting with you in the near future to discuss our concerns and to try to establish how the Australian government intends to act to protect the dwindling shark populations off our coasts. There is an opportunity here for this country to take the lead in shark conservation measures that the world's oceans urgently require.