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B.C.'s spiny dogfish makes history as world's first 'sustainable' shark fishery

BY LARRY PYNN, VANCOUVER SUN SEPTEMBER 20, 2011

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B.C.'s spiny dogfish

Photograph by: PNG files, ...

B.C.'s spiny dogfish has become the first shark fishery in the world to be deemed sustainable, helping to open doors to foreign markets and offering a glimmer of hope for globally overfished shark populations.

The Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), based in London, England, has concluded that B.C.'s commercial hook-and-line dogfish fishery is sustainable following an independent scientific assessment by the accredited certification body Moody Marine Ltd.

The council found that dogfish meets the "global standard for sustainable fisheries, which includes healthy fish stocks, minimal ecosystem impacts, and an effective fisheries-management system," and is "managed within the precautionary framework" of the federal fisheries department.

"We're really excited," Michael Renwick, executive director of the B.C. Dogfish Hook and Line Industry Association, said in an interview. "We're hoping MSC certification will result in new interest for dogfish products."

The decision should serve to maintain and enhance markets, especially in Europe, where environmentalists have campaigned against shark fisheries globally, and potentially lead to higher prices, he said.

"It's a small nugget of hope that environmental groups will open their eyes to this first initiative to ensure sustainability by a very rigorous process."

In an opinion letter in the journal Nature in 2010, scientists such as Jennifer Jacquet and Daniel Pauly of the University of B.C. Fisheries Centre said the MSC's credibility is at risk unless it

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"creates more stringent standards, cracks down on arguably loose interpretation of its rules, and alters its process to avoid a potential financial incentive to certify large fisheries."

However, the MSC's dogfish certification is supported by the David Suzuki Foundation (DSF) and World Wildlife Fund, which co-founded the MSC but is no longer involved in its operation.

Scott Wallace, a DSF fisheries analyst, said Tuesday that despite ongoing questions about stock assessments, the fishery was worth supporting because all vessels have electronic monitoring, there is limited bycatch of dogfish in other fisheries, and the total allowable catch is conservatively set.

"This is an exception in the world of shark fisheries," he said.

The MSC's certification of dogfish is for five years, during which time there are annual audits.

Nick Dulvy, Canada research chair in marine biodiversity and conservation at Simon Fraser University, said dogfish stocks, especially in the Strait of Georgia, must continue to be carefully monitored in the future.

Dogfish take 35 years to become sexually mature. "They've got pretty much the longest pregnancy in the animal kingdom — two years at a time," he added. "We have to be very careful. If we're going to call them sustainable, I'd like to see much better monitoring."

The hook-and-line fishery caught 3,147 tonnes of spiny dogfish in 2009-10, accounting for 92 per cent of the species' total landings in B.C. The remaining eight per cent was landed by the trawl fishery (not part of the assessment and thus not certified to the MSC standard) or as bycatch in other hook-and-line fisheries.

Dogfish is the most common of 15 species of sharks documented in B.C. waters and the province's most widely utilized fish. The meat is sold to Europe, including as "rock salmon" for fish and chips in England, the belly flaps smoked and sold in Germany, the fins for Asian shark-fin soup, cartilage for health pills (of dubious value), and the remainder for organic fertilizer.

Among the other B.C. fisheries already MSC-certified as sustainable are hake, halibut and Fraser sockeye, the latter particularly disputed by some environmental groups.

In other shark-related developments, Fin Donnelly, MP for New Westminster-Coquitlam and Port Moody and the NDP's critic for fisheries and oceans, said he plans to introduce a private member's bill this fall calling for a ban on the importation of shark fins into Canada.

Toronto is debating a ban on the sale of shark fin after Brantford, Ont., became the first city in Canada to ban the product last May.

Shark-fin soup is strictly a status symbol in the Asian community, popular at wedding banquets, and the fins do not even add flavour to the soup.

Claudia Li, founder of the Vancouver-based conservation group, Shark Truth, said the only real way to save declining shark populations is to end the global shark-fin-soup industry.

"While most dogfish go to make fish and chips, some do end up in cheap versions of shark-fin soup, which is why the solution for sharks globally does not lie with MSC certification or sustainable shark fisheries; it lies in banning shark-fin products," Li said.

The global shark-fin trade, at 26 million to 73 million sharks per year, is considered unsustainable.

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