Fact Sheet: Spurdog

Spiny dogfish sharks (spurdog) are:

- exceptionally slow-growing and vulnerable to overfishing
- heavily exploited primarily for European demand for meat
- classified by the IUCN as *Critically Endangered* in the Northeast Atlantic
- inadequately protected and in danger of collapse from overfishing in Europe, and
- in urgent need of stronger conservation measures.

Biology
Spurdog, also known as spiny dogfish, are especially susceptible to overexploitation and long lasting depletion due to their exceptionally slow growth, late maturity, and small litters. Females do not reproduce until their teen years (or later) and give birth to only about six pups after pregnancies that last nearly two years, a record among animals. Like most sharks, spurdog are key predators in marine food webs and therefore important to keeping oceans in balance.

Fisheries today
Europe is the source of a persistent demand for spurdog meat that drives intense fisheries for the species in Europe and around the world. Spurdog meat is sold as fish and chips in the UK and as smoked belly flaps in Germany; filets are eaten in other EU countries including Belgium, France, and Italy. Although not preferred, spurdog fins enter international trade for use in "shark fin soup", an Asian delicacy. Spurdog school by size and sex; demand for large fish often results in fisheries targeting aggregations of pregnant females which further hampers the population's reproductive capacity.

Currently, vessels from the UK, France, Ireland, and Norway take most of the spurdog catches from the Northeast Atlantic population, with the main fishing grounds being in the North Sea, West of Scotland, and the Celtic Sea, as well as occasionally the Norwegian Sea. Spurdog are fished with bottom trawls, hook & line gear, and gillnets. Substantial numbers of spurdog are also taken incidentally, as "bycatch" in a variety of fisheries.

Population status
Due to intense, long-term overfishing, the Northeast Atlantic spurdog stock is the most depleted spurdog population in the world. Scientists from the International Council for Exploration of the Sea (ICES) report "undeniable" trends of rapid decline to record low abundance levels, and warn that the population may be in danger of collapse. The IUCN-World Conservation Union includes spurdog on their *Red List of Threatened Species,* as *Vulnerable* globally; the Northeast Atlantic population is considered *Critically Endangered.*

Scientific advice
ICES has recommended ending targeted fisheries for spurdog in the Northeast Atlantic through a single Total Allowable Catch (TAC) limit of zero, applicable to all areas where spurdog are caught in the Northeast Atlantic. ICES scientists also advise the establishment of measures to reduce bycatch of spurdog to the lowest level possible.

Conservation Measures
The spurdog is one of only a few species of sharks for which the EU limits catch. Although the EU TAC for spurdog in the North and Norwegian Sea has been reduced annually for many years, it has remained far in excess of the scientific advice and often above the prior year's landings. In 2007, spurdog bycatch in the North Sea was limited to 5% of the live weight of the retained catch. Also in 2007, the area in which Northeast Atlantic spurdog catch is limited was expanded, but the corresponding TAC is roughly equivalent to regional landings and therefore not low enough to lead to recovery of the population. In late 2008, the European Commission proposed one EU TAC of zero for spurdog for 2009, but the Council of Ministers instead cut the spurdog TAC in half and imposed a maximum landing size of 100cm (total length). In late 2009, the Commission proposed a 90% reduction in spurdog TACs for 2010. The EU Council of Ministers decides the final 2010 spurdog TAC December 14-15, 2009 in Brussels.

In 2007, Norway banned fishing and landing of spurdog in its waters and in international waters in ICES areas I-XIV, except for boats under 28 meters using traditional gear close to shore. Spurdog bycatch in other fisheries must be landed and Norwegian fisheries managers can stop fisheries when catches reach the prior year's level. Norway has had a 70 cm minimum landing size limit on spurdog for many years.

In 2007, the EU, under German leadership, proposed to limit international spurdog trade to sustainable levels through listing under Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). The lack of effective spurdog management in the EU was used as a powerful argument to help defeat the proposal. For the next CITES Conference in March 2010, Germany is again spearheading an EU effort to list the spurdog under Appendix II.

In 2008, the EU secured the listing of Northern hemisphere populations of spiny dogfish under Appendix II of the Convention on Migratory Species. This action is meant to spark international cooperation in the development of regional initiatives to conserve the species.

Call to Action
Northeast Atlantic spurdog have been overfished for far too long. The EU has called on countries around the world to make spurdog a conservation priority, but has yet to impose effective measures for rebuilding its own population. For years, scientists have advised that directed fishing on this *Critically Endangered* population should cease and that bycatch minimization measures should be imposed. It is high time to heed that advice.

The Shark Alliance urges EU Fisheries Ministers to improve the outlook for beleaguered spurdog (spiny dogfish sharks) by working to secure:

- A single TAC of zero to cover all Northeast Atlantic & Baltic spurdog in 2010
- Complementary measures to minimize bycatch and discard mortality
- Development of a comprehensive EU spurdog recovery plan, and
- Prompt implementation of the European Community Plan of Action for Sharks.