

Monique Leane
Victorian Fisheries Authority
Fishery Manager
PO Box 4509, Melbourne VIC 3001
By email: monique.lean@vfa.vic.gov.au

PROPOSED FISHERIES (MAKO SHARK) NOTICE

Dear Monique,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on the Proposed Fisheries (Mako Shark) Notice.

As you are aware VRFish wrote to the Victorian Fisheries Authority in September 2017 to recommend a minimum size limit for shortfin mako sharks. The impetus to investigate the introduction of a minimum size limit for shortfin mako sharks in Victoria stems from social concerns of retained catches of near-neonatal and small mako sharks.

Prior to writing to the VFA on the matter, VRFish ran a consultation process through its membership of fishing associations, clubs and unaffiliated fishers for the purposes of seeking comments and endorsement for a mako minimum size limit proposal. A written proposal was also prepared and circulated on two occasions. Some members also posted the proposal on social media to further broaden the testing of the proposal. At the August 2017 VRFish State Council our membership endorsed an action to recommend the proposal to the VFA.

During the initial phase of the public consultation process, there appeared to be good support for the proposal. The last two weeks of the process, however has raised many comments and views from our fishers that strongly opposed the introduction of a mako minimum size limit. In response, VRFish encouraged fishers on social media to make formal submissions through the official public consultation process.

***Let's make fishing
better, for everyone.***

Fishers have raised concerns that the proposal is not science based, creates a safety risk and is not in the best interest of our fishery by adding additional regulations.

Positively, the debate has created awareness of the issue in a way that could hardly have been achieved in any other way. As you know, VRFish deals with a multitude of issues important to recreational fishing and it can sometimes be difficult to engage with recreational fishers on all of them despite a variety of different strategies employed. The public consultation process has also created awareness in how VRFish operates and how fishers can become more involved in policy and decision making. This is a valuable precursor to the upcoming review of the *Fisheries Regulations 2009*.

As the representative body for recreational fishers in Victoria its vital that we listen to our fishers, both when proposals are raised and when these proposals are put out for public consultation. Our proposal had support initially from fishers and that support has now diminished. **If the VFA cannot demonstrate there has been broad-scale support from Victorian fishers as part of the public consultation process, then our recommendation is our proposal should be withdrawn.**

The public consultation process has awakened strong support for protection of the recreational shark fishery in Victoria and a need to ensure the sustainability of our fishery. In part, this was the motivation behind the proposal through supporting our fishers in responsible fishing attitudes and behaviours. There are alternative opportunities that include encouraging our fishers to voluntarily release small and very large sharks when it is safe and practicable to do so and to advocate for further research and funding.

It is worth noting that VRFish are collaborating with partner organisations including the VFA to seek funding for a project to increase the understanding of mako shark movements in Victorian waters and genetic structure. Another funding proposal is seeking to promote the adoption of enhanced catch, handling and release practices for sharks and rays. Discussions have provided some support for these initiatives.

The consultation has raised some points which would be of value to note and clarify within our submission.

Current status of shortfin makos sharks in Australian waters

There is insufficient data to assess the species status. Data that is available as analysed in a 2013 report *Shark futures: A synthesis of available data on mako and porbeagle sharks in Australasian waters: Current status and future directions* does not indicate any evidence for significant declines in mako abundance. The International Union of Threatened Species (IUCN)

lists the Indo-west Pacific subpopulation of shortfin makos as 'Vulnerable'. Observations by recreational fishers in Victoria continue to report good catches of shortfin mako sharks.

Shortfin mako sharks are vulnerable to overfishing due to their life history and low reproductive capacity. As a data-deficient species it is prudent to continue to take a precautionary approach towards the management of the species. This is reflected in a daily bag limit of 1 for recreational fishers in Victoria. VRFish believes our mako shark fishery remains in a healthy state.

The current understanding of the biology and life history of shortfin mako sharks is at birth, they are around 70cm in length and have a fast initial growth rate reported at 42-61 cm per year as juveniles. They can live to at least 29 years old and grow to 4 metres in length. Females are thought to mature at 18 years of age and 280-300cm total length, have a gestation period of 15-18 months and only pup (reproduce) every 2 to 3 years with an average of 12 pups per litter.

Proposal Timeline

A proposal to apply a minimum size limit for mako sharks was first raised to VRFish in March 2017 and followed the below timeline.

- 17 March 2017 – issue raised at the State Recreational Fishing Roundtable Meeting
- 27 May 2017 – Proposal presented at VRFish State Council Meeting with written proposal sent to VRFish membership of fishing associations and affiliated members.
- 10 July 2017 – Proposal emailed to VRFish State Council membership again for comment.
- 12 August 2017 – Proposal endorsed at VRFish State Council meeting with a motion *“to move mako shark proposal to next level (whatever form that may take) by forwarding proposal to the VFA”*.
- 13 September 2017 – Letter sent to VFA recommending size limit.
- 15 February 2018 - Received notification that the VFA was supportive to consult on a minimum size for mako sharks.

Safeguarding our social licence

Australia's fisheries including sharks species are well-managed by State and Commonwealth Governments and are considered as world's best practice. That aside, there is ever increasing attention by the community placing judgement on recreational fishing practices, ethics and the continuance of our social licence. VRFish believes that Victorian recreational fishers need to be cognisant of this risk and take a pro-active approach.

Mako minimum size limits

VRFish has received strong opposition by fishers for a minimum size limit. The Game Fishing Association of Victoria in their submission, are concerned there is a lack of science-based evidence that a size limit is required to ensure the sustainability of our shortfin mako sharks stocks.

VRFish strongly agrees with the need for science-based fisheries management. In reality there are substantial knowledge and data gaps in the management of our fisheries and stock assessments. Therefore, in the absence of definitive scientific data, it is best practice fisheries management to revert to the 'precautionary principle'.

Measuring Mako Sharks

There have been concerns raised on safe handling and measurement techniques. These concerns are legitimate and safety is paramount for our fishers. VRFish does not want to increase the risk to our fisher's safety. Additionally, the discussion has confirmed that VRFish should be providing additional advice to fishers on safe shark fishing and handling techniques. Through these discussions, allowing the use of barbed gaffs has also been raised.

It is worth noting that in the United States, recreational fishers are subject to a minimum size limit for shortfin makos in Atlantic waters of 210cm fork length. Fishers in the US use a marked floating rope which is clipped onto the leader while the shark is still in the water. These sharks are considered a genetically separate sub-population to our Australian sharks.

Post-release survival of released shortfin makos

Applying a size limit to a species with poor release survival is counterproductive. Research into shortfin makos through previous tagging studies has determined the species has high survival rates post-release, even after a long fight time. The endothermic physiology of makos is thought to aid recovery following release. The research does indicate that deep hooking is a cause of post-release mortality. Therefore, promotion of using non-offset circle hooks is another action recreational fishers can adopt to support a healthy shark population.

Concluding recommendations:

- If the VFA cannot demonstrate there has been broad-scale support from Victorian fishers as part of the public consultation process, then our recommendation is our proposal should be withdrawn.
- Develop and implement an education program to support best practice and responsible catching, safe handling and releasing mako sharks.

- *Encourage fishers to voluntarily release small makos under 1 metre (*in lieu of a minimum size limit) and large shortfin mako sharks over 3 metres in total length, when safe and practicable to do so.
- The consultation process demonstrates Victorian fishers are seeking scientific evidence to underpin any changes to fisheries management.
- For future public consultations with recreational fishers, the VFA should prepare a discussion paper detailing background information, available science, objectives for the change and exploration of future options.

Thank you again for running a public consultation process on the size limit proposal.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Rob Loats', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Rob Loats
Chairman
Victorian Recreational Fishing Peak Body

8 June 2018