

A photograph of a shark being hoisted by a crane on the deck of a fishing vessel. The shark is suspended vertically by a metal hook, its mouth open. The vessel's deck is made of rusty metal, and a person in an orange jumpsuit is visible in the background. A yellow buoy is also visible.

Impunity on the High Seas

Greenpeace exposes illegal fishing by a
Spanish vessel in a future Global Ocean
Treaty sanctuary
2026

GREENPEACE

Content

- Introduction
- Investigation
- 1. Why is conserving the Convergence Zone so critical?
- 2. Operation details
- 3. Legislation applicable to this particular longliner
- 4. Documented cases with photos
- 5. Is this case an exception, or does data suggest this is a widespread practice?
 - Demands

----- **INTRODUCTION**

Industrial fishing is one of the greatest threats to marine life. Fish stocks are being harvested and processed faster than they can recover. As a result, more than 37% are already overexploited worldwide. In addition to overfishing, industrial fishing also drives biodiversity loss, destroys marine habitats, accidentally catches threatened species such as sharks, cetaceans, birds, and turtles, causes pollution, and contributes to climate change through CO₂ emissions.

Well-managed marine reserves are the most effective tool for restoring and protecting marine biodiversity, including fish stocks. The most successful reserves include areas known as «no take zones» or «strict protection zones», where all human activity is prohibited.

The high seas—waters beyond any national jurisdiction—account for nearly two-thirds (64%) of the ocean. **Yet less than 1% is protected. Once the Global Ocean Treaty enters into force in 2026, it will establish the first legal framework to create a network of marine reserves in the high seas, allowing marine life to recover.** Although other regional and sectoral bodies, such as Regional Fisheries Management Organizations (RFMOs), already regulate certain activities in these waters, none has effectively protected the ocean.

According to science, **at least 30% of the world's oceans must be protected by 2030** to keep oceans resilient and healthy in the long term. This is known as the 30x30 target.

Establishing high-seas sanctuaries will help stop the collapse of marine biodiversity and safeguard food security for the billions of people who depend on the ocean.

Greenpeace has identified five priority areas for protection in international waters:

- Convergence Zone of the Canary and Guinea currents in the North Atlantic.
- Sargasso Sea, in the North Atlantic.
- Banana Hole, in the Arctic waters of the Norwegian Sea.
- Southern Tasman Sea and Lord Howe Ridge, in the South Pacific.
- The Salas y Gómez and Nazca underwater mountain ranges in the South Pacific.

In March 2026, Greenpeace traveled to the Convergence Zone of the Canary and Guinea currents, located in international waters off the west coast of Africa, to document what was happening in this high-seas region. This is what we witnessed.

INVESTIGATION: ILLEGAL FISHING IN THE CONVERGENCE ZONE

1. Why is conserving the Convergence Zone so critical?

Off the coast from Senegal to Liberia, is an area where **the cold Canary Current meets the warm Guinea Current, creating a hotspot for marine biodiversity.** This area is known as the Canary-Guinea Current Convergence Zone and is home to a wide range of ecosystems and species, including invertebrates, birds, mammals, sea turtles, fish, and several endangered shark species.

The mixing of cold, nutrient-rich waters with warm waters, which provide the necessary heat, creates ideal conditions for life to thrive. High levels of dissolved nutrients drive biological productivity, benefiting ocean life—from tiny plankton to the largest migratory species—and sustaining a complex food web. The area features numerous seamounts; in Africa, these are only found here and in the Congo Basin. Seamounts shape ocean dynamics, help retain and release nutrients, and provide resting, refuge, feeding, and breeding areas for migratory species such as sharks, sea turtles, and birds.

2. Fishing operation details (location, date, and time)

On March 22, 2026, Greenpeace, aboard the inflatable boats of its ship Arctic Sunrise, documented the fishing operations of the Spanish-flagged longliner Naboeiro. At the

time, the vessel was operating in international waters within the Canary-Guinea Current Convergence Zone (hereinafter, «the convergence zone»). Although this area is designated an Ecologically or Biologically Significant Marine Area (EBSA) under the Convention on Biological Diversity, this designation does not entail the regulation of destructive fishing practices; it serves only as a scientific tool.

The fishing vessel began fishing one day before the documentation described below was obtained. Figure 1 shows the route taken by the *Naboeiro* on March 22.

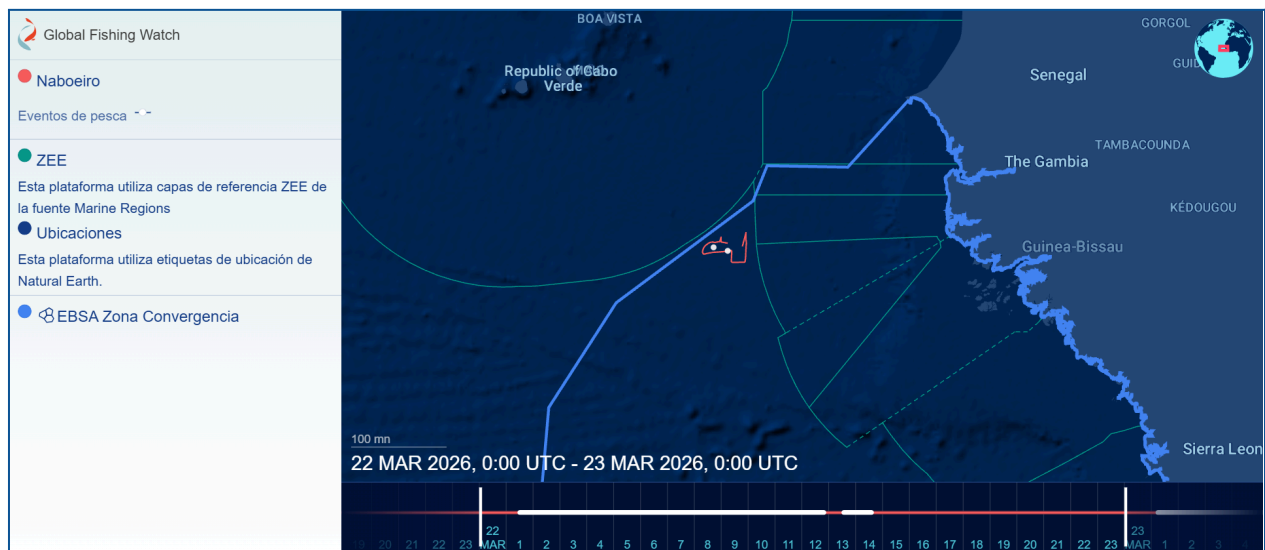


Figure 1. Route of longliner *Naboeiro* (in red) within the EBSA Canary-Guinea Current Convergence Zone (outlined in blue) on March 22, obtained using [Global Fishing Watch](https://www.globalfishingwatch.org/).

On April 4, the *Naboeiro* reached the port of Mindelo in Cape Verde, where it unloaded its cargo.

3. Legislation applicable to this EU-flagged longline vessel operating in the North Atlantic

A drift longline consists of a main line, or «mother line», kept near the surface (surface longline), from which a series of baited hooks is suspended. It is used to catch large pelagic fish such as swordfish, with the gear suspended about 60–100 meters below the surface. Surface longlines can be extremely long, stretching from 20 to more than 100¹

¹ Hooked on sharks: The EU fishing fleets fueling the global shark trade
<https://www.greenpeace.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/PTO-Shark-Trade-Report-Final-Web.pdf>

kilometers. **The problem with longline fishing is that it not only catches target species like swordfish, but also catches other species. When target stocks decline and catches fall, fishing for other species—some of which may be endangered—skyrockets. This is known as bycatch, or incidental catch.**

3.1. The impact of longline fishing on shark conservation

Longline fishing is a highly destructive method. It uses kilometers of line fitted with thousands of hooks that indiscriminately catch juvenile and adult sharks. As noted earlier, baited hooks are not selective and often accidentally catch non-target marine species. When overfishing occurs in breeding grounds, it prevents populations from recovering.

Because of how harmful longline fishing can be, fleets must take special care with species caught on their hooks. **Specific regulations not only establish which endangered, threatened, or protected species are not to be caught but also provide indications for their immediate unharmed release if they are accidentally captured and brought alongside the vessel.**

If sharks are dead, they must be returned (i.e., discarded) to the sea as they were. Mortality remains high even when they are released alive, which is why the law requires rapid, harm-free release. Injuries sustained by sharks when brought on board—whether with a lasso or a hook—can reduce their chances of survival. For this reason, industry best practices² clearly set out the handling and release of sharks in line with legally established conservation measures.

Unfortunately, **sharks have long been targeted for the high culinary and medicinal value of their fins** compared to their meat. As a result, «finning»—cutting off a shark's dorsal fin and discarding the rest of the animal, alive or dead, back into the sea—was once a common practice. This practice is now prohibited. To enforce this regulation, **the EU expressly forbids European-flagged vessels from removing shark fins**, whether operating within or outside EU waters, and requires the whole animal to be landed at port, except for the head and guts, which may be discarded onboard.

² Safe handling and release of sharks. Best Practice Handbook (Project FIP Blues, 2022): https://fipblues.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Manual_BBPP_eng.pdf

3.2. Current regulation

Longline fishing in the Atlantic is regulated by [ICCAT](#), a Regional Fisheries Management Organization (RFMO). As the EU is a contracting party, the relevant measures are set out in [Regulation \(EU\) 2017/2107](#). This regulation lays down the *management, conservation, and control measures applicable in the Convention area of the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas and amending Council Regulations (EC) No. 1936/2001, (EC) No. 1984/2003, and (EC) No. 520/2007*. It therefore governs the operations of this Spanish-flagged longliner in the international waters of the North Atlantic, where the case documented in this report occurred.

EU-flagged vessels are also subject to additional, stricter rules on certain fishing practices. These include shark finning prohibitions and fisheries control measures, such as the requirement to record every catch and discard in fishing logbooks during operations.

The rules the Naboeiro is required to follow—which might have been breached based on the images collected by Greenpeace—are set out below:

- **Finning on board**

[Council Regulation \(EC\) No. 1185/2003 on the removal of fins of sharks on board vessels](#), as amended by [Regulation \(EU\) No. 605/2013](#), prohibits the practice of shark finning. Article 3 explicitly prohibits «*removing shark fins on board vessels, and to retain on board, tranship or land shark fins*». The 2013 amendment implements the «fins attached» policy, according to which «*in order to facilitate on-board storage, shark fins may be partially sliced through and folded against the carcass, but shall not be removed from the carcass before landing*».

The footage shows sharks being brought aboard and later thrown overboard in pieces after their fins were cut off. This is clear evidence of noncompliance with the above legislation.

- **Conservation measures for protected species**

A provision of [Regulation \(EU\) 2017/2107](#) establishes the obligation to implement conservation measures for the [bigeye thresher sharks](#) (*Alopias superciliosus*), classified as vulnerable:

- Article 32 «Retaining on board, transshipping or landing any part or whole carcass of bigeye thresher sharks caught [...] shall be prohibited». And «shall promptly release, unharmed, bigeye thresher sharks [...] when brought alongside the vessel».

This provision stresses that these animals must be released or discarded quickly and without harm once they are brought alongside the vessel. This means that once the animal is alongside the vessel, the crew must cut the line of the trace as close to the hook as possible to free the shark.

The images show these animals being hoisted aboard the *Naboeiro* with a hook to facilitate the maneuver. This may indicate a failure to adequately apply conservation measures and could constitute a possible breach of current EU rules.

- **Control measures, catch reporting, and discards**

Article 36a of [Regulation \(UE\) 2017/2107](#), on data collection for sharks, stipulates that «Member States shall implement data collection programmes [...] of sharks catch, effort, size and discard data». To comply with the obligations of this article, the EU set forth a reporting system in [Regulation \(EU\) 2023/2842](#), known as the new fisheries control regulation, which amends the previous framework (Regulation (EC) No 1224/2009) and mandates full digital traceability and the use of electronic means for reporting catches, including discards: «The master of each Union catching vessel shall keep an electronic fishing logbook» recording «the estimated quantities in kilograms live weight or, where appropriate, the number of individuals, of each species retained on board» and «estimated quantities of each species discarded in kilograms live weight or, where appropriate, in number of individuals».

The fishing logbook of the *Naboeiro* for 22 March, to which the General Secretariat for Fisheries (SGP) of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has access, will show whether the vessel reported the shark discards identified in Greenpeace's images in

accordance with the law or whether it failed to meet its reporting obligations. Greenpeace has already requested this information from the SGP under the Aarhus Convention.

3.3. Illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing

To prevent fishing vessels from performing such practices with impunity, the law dictates what constitutes illegal fishing. Regulation (EU) 2017/2107 defines in Article 2(1) of [Regulation \(EC\) No 1005/2008](#) what constitutes **illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing** («IUU fishing») activities. The fishing activities relevant to this case include the following:

- Those conducted by fishing vessels in violation of national laws or international obligations, including those undertaken by cooperating States to a relevant regional fisheries management organization;
- those which have not been reported, or have been misreported, to the relevant national authority, in contravention of national laws and regulations.

These are precisely the two types of activity identified in the images below.

Furthermore, [Regulation \(EC\) No 1010/2009](#) sets out the implementing rules for the 2008 Regulation, while [Regulation \(EU\) No 468/2010](#) establishes the EU list of vessels engaged in IUU fishing. A vessel that breaches EU fisheries law may therefore be added to that list.

4. Documented cases ([photos](#))

Among all the catches Greenpeace observed during the fishing control mission, we focused on three specific cases.

These events concern the incidental capture of three bigeye thresher sharks. No stock assessments currently exist for this species in Atlantic waters. However, according to an ecological risk analysis³, **it is the pelagic shark species most vulnerable to longline fishing in the Atlantic.**

³ Cortés, E., Domingo, A., Miller, P., Forselledo, R., Mas, F., Arocha, F., Campana, S., Coelho, R., Da Silva, C., Hazin, F.H.V., Holtzhausen, H., Keene, K., Lucena, F., Ramírez, K., Santos, M.N., Semba-Murakami, Y., Yokawa, K. 2015. Expanded ecological risk assessment of pelagic sharks caught in Atlantic pelagic longline fisheries. Collective Volume of Scientific Papers ICCAT 71: 2637–2688.

On March 22, between 11:00 and 11:35 a.m., **Greenpeace documented three specimens of protected bigeye thresher sharks being caught** and hoisted aboard with a hook, a practice that violates regulations because it seriously injures the animals (Figure 2).





Figure 2. Images showing three bigeye thresher sharks being hauled aboard the *Naboeiro* with a hook during fishing operations on 22 March 2026, in violation of current regulations protecting this species.

We then observed these **animals being cut into pieces, some of which were thrown overboard**. Among the discarded remains were **body parts with fins removed, indicating that the fins had been cut off on board** (Figure 3). **This is a clear breach of EU rules** on shark finning by European vessels and a failure to properly apply conservation measures for protected species, which require these animals «*shall promptly [be] release, unharmed, [...] when brought alongside the vessel*».





Figure 3. Greenpeace images showing remains of three bigeye thresher sharks cut into pieces and thrown overboard from the *Naboeiro* after the removal of their dorsal and/or pectoral fins on board, in breach of current EU regulations.

Beyond the crew's improper handling of these sharks, as shown in the pictures—which would indicate a breach of EU finning rules and show the low selectivity of surface longline fishing, thereby putting threatened species at risk—the vessel's captain is required to record the capture and/or discarding of these animals in the fishing logbook.

To verify whether the captain submitted the report correctly, Greenpeace sent a letter to the General Secretariat for Fisheries on the publication date of this investigation requesting a copy of the *Naboeiro* fishing logbook for March 22. Satisfying our request is essential to determine whether the vessel complied with EU fisheries control rules, therefore it falls under Directive 2003/4/EC on [public access to environmental information](#).

5. Is this case an exception, or does data suggest this is a widespread practice?

It is difficult to assess the actual practices of individual fishing vessels. Except in the few cases where vessels have voluntarily installed automated monitoring systems, fishing

activity is recorded in the daily logbooks submitted to the General Secretariat for Fisheries of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food.

Vessel masters must record their fishing activity in logbooks, including the number and weight of each species caught, the number of animals retained or discarded (alive or dead), set positions (the location where fishing gear is deployed), fishing gear technical characteristics, and set times (in this case, the time the longline is in the water). In addition, the EU Data Collection Framework (DCF) requires bodies independent of the fishing industry to collect relevant data on the longline fleet. This onboard program is designed to collect data and biological samples for scientific purposes, data that are usually unavailable on the landings of distant-water freezer vessels because much of the catch is processed at sea. **However, fishery observers only collect this type of data on 1% of fishing days in the North Atlantic⁴.**

ICCAT's annual catch statistics are organized by area. The zone where the *Naboeiro* was documented fishing on 22 March 2026 is designated BIL94B and corresponds to the Eastern North Atlantic subarea, which covers Atlantic waters north of the Equator and east of the 45° West meridian.

ICCAT's most recent annual data for Spanish longline vessels in the area show that 35,370 kg of bigeye thresher sharks were discarded in 2024.

These figures represent one year of fishing activity (**365 days**) for the entire Spanish-flagged longline fleet in area BIL94B, which comprises around **100 vessels**. Greenpeace's estimate from a single day of observations represents about 1% of the total reported to ICCAT for 2024. If that one vessel-day in 2026 were theoretically extrapolated across the full fleet over a year, it would suggest that the figures reported by the industry to ICCAT in 2024 may be hundreds of times lower than the actual catch and discard levels. Although this is only an approximation, the scale of the discrepancy is striking.

Scientific reports also highlight the gap between reported and actual catch. A [2022 study](#) **estimated that discards of three shark species classified as endangered or critically endangered by a single fleet operating in West Africa were around 32**

⁴ Hooked on sharks: The EU fishing fleets fuelling the global shark trade
<https://www.greenpeace.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/PTO-Shark-Trade-Report-Final-Web.pdf>

times higher than reported. This unrecorded mortality is a serious concern because it is not reflected in population assessments.

The case documented by Greenpeace on the high seas reveals an alarming reality: some industrial fisheries still operate with impunity, in blatant breach of European and international rules. Longliners repeatedly commit illegal and unregulated fishing practices, and prey on endangered species whose loss accelerates the collapse of ecosystems. This is not only an ecological crisis. This plunder also threatens the future of fisheries and risks fatally undermining the historic Global Ocean Treaty. If we allow international waters to remain a lawless territory where industrial vessels run rampant, the Treaty could become meaningless before its sanctuaries have any chance to protect marine life.

Demands

- **Create marine sanctuaries:** We call on Spain to honor its commitment to protect at least 30% of the oceans by 2030 by designating a network of fully protected and effectively managed marine areas. At COP1 of the Global Ocean Treaty, the government must support all proposed protected areas.
- **Stop the industrial fishing lobby:** We ask to stop large corporations and RFMOs from exerting pressure during the negotiations on the implementation and enforcement of the Treaty, to prevent industrial and destructive fishing from dominating decision-making on the high seas.
- **Greater transparency:** We demand that civil society and the scientific community have greater access to data on catches and landings of both target and bycatch species, so they can fulfil their role as watchdogs of the public interest, as recognized by the European Court of Human Rights. Lifting this veil of opacity is the only way to ensure real scrutiny and safeguard the fleet's long-term sustainability.
- **Transition to a sustainable fishing model:** We call for an end to industrial fishing and aquaculture given their negative impact on the environment and fish populations, the destruction of habitats, the loss of biodiversity, and high CO2 emissions. We also call for a just transition that leaves no one behind and shifts the sector towards sustainable fishing.
- **Enforce existing fisheries rules:** Until destructive fishing is phased out, we call on the authorities to strictly enforce current fisheries legislation and/or adopt a more rigorous and precautionary regulatory approach. Sanctions imposed after

the fact do not prevent the harm caused by the current industrial fishing model, and we must ensure that no marine species is driven to extinction. According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), more than 25% of pelagic shark species are threatened.

END
Greenpeace 2026