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The President of the French Republic
Mr Emmanuel Macron
Palais de l'Élysée
55 rue du Faubourg-Saint-Honoré
75008 Paris
France

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Dear Mr. President,

I am a secondary school student in Ireland. I am deeply passionate about our beautiful planet and all the wonderful ways that life exists. Seeing the incredibly detrimental effects that our current habits are having on nature is undoubtedly upsetting for all of us. I believe it is the responsibility of the people in power such as yourself to lead the change that is needed in order to secure the future of our planet. And in the coming weeks at your One Ocean Summit and again at the UN negotiations for a global ocean treaty, France and the EU have the responsibility to lead.

Sharks have been a vital part of Earth's oceans for over 450 million years. To put that in perspective, the first dinosaurs only appeared 230 million years ago.¹ Sharks are diverse and amazing animals, a species with incredible abilities ranging from some of the fastest swimmers in the sea to glowing in the dark. But as a result of the lack of proper regulation and monitoring, shark populations worldwide are being decimated by the fishing industry.

In the past 50 years, there has been a 70% decline in the number of sharks in the ocean.² Upwards of 100 million sharks are killed each year, both intentionally for their liver oil, gills, and fins, and as an unwanted bycatch of regular fishing.³ The

¹ The history of sharks- Micronesia Conservation Organization <http://micronesiaconservation.org/jen-page-2/>

² <https://theconversation.com/oceanic-sharks-and-rays-have-declined-by-71-since-1970-a-global-solution-is-needed-154102>

³ <https://www.greenpeace.org/international/story/46967/100-million-dead-sharks-its-not-all-about-shark-fin-soup/>

International Union for the Conservation of Nature lists 143 species of shark as endangered, critically endangered, near threatened or vulnerable on its Red List.

These magnificent creatures that have been swimming in the ocean since before trees first evolved on land are for the first time in history facing extinction. Throughout the last 439 million years, there have been 5 periods of mass extinction with an average of 83% of all marine species disappearing off the fossil record.

Sharks have adapted and survived through all 5 of these mass extinctions, but by all current scientific predictions, they will not survive humans, unless those in power stand up and instigate real and meaningful change. You have an opportunity to act at the upcoming negotiations for a High Seas Treaty⁴ in March in New York. In fact after hearing how much danger these creatures are in, I can't see how you could fail to act.

Sharks are a keystone species.⁵ This means that every part of the food web relies on the presence of sharks in the ecosystem. When there is a loss or decrease of sharks in an area, the whole system feels the effects.

Keeping ecosystems in balance is absolutely essential for the future of fishing industries. Imbalanced ecosystems cannot produce food for human consumption for long before being irreparably lost. Overfishing of certain species can result in an imbalanced ecosystem, along with pollution, and other factors that cause loss of marine life.

Sharks play a vital role as the apex predator in marine ecosystems. They have few natural predators other than humans and feed on animals below them in the food chain. By doing this they limit the abundance of their prey, keeping ecosystems in balance.

In some marine ecosystems the presence of sharks is essential for the preservation of seagrass meadows. Turtles, which are their prey, eat seagrass which grows in large areas underwater and provide habitats for many fish, shellfish and birds. The presence of the sharks causes the turtles to constantly be in motion, leading them to graze over a large area of seagrass. But when these apex predators are absent in an area, the turtles settle and graze heavily in the best parts of the meadows, destroying them. Seagrass meadows account for over 10% of the ocean's capacity to store carbon despite only covering 0.2% of the seafloor.⁶ It captures carbon at a rate 35 times faster than tropical rainforests. As such, it is a vital resource in the fight against global warming and it is vital we protect it.

Like humans, sharks are a K-selected species. They grow and mature over a long period of time. Females spend up to a year or more pregnant and typically only have

⁴ <https://www.clientearth.org/latest/latest-updates/news/how-does-seagrass-help-fight-climate-change/>

⁵ <http://micronesianconservation.org/sharks-in-trouble/>

⁶ <https://www.clientearth.org/latest/latest-updates/news/how-does-seagrass-help-fight-climate-change/>

a small number of pups. This slow cycle of birth and growth means that they are especially vulnerable to overfishing. The market for shark products has ballooned in recent years, with technological improvements making them easier to catch and the demand increasing globally. This has damaged shark populations immensely and we are nearing the point from which there is no recovery. Sharks are not a rich food source and their catching is of no great benefit to humanity. Overfishing them to the point of extinction would be ultimately pointless for humanity and endlessly detrimental for the planet. We need to step in to protect these animals before it is too late.

The adoption of a Global Ocean Treaty⁷ is the necessary next step for protecting the future of our ocean. As has been proven by multiple efforts in the past, such as the ban on the capture of Mako sharks⁸, small, piecemeal efforts require a lot of time and energy and ultimately have little impact. A global ocean treaty would ensure effective, efficient, and educated action at scale. Only by working together can we preserve our ocean for future generations.

A Global Ocean Treaty could designate the creation of fully protected marine areas, covering nursery, breeding and feeding grounds. Studies have shown⁹ that these protected areas have shark populations 14 times larger than in unprotected areas. This allows species to recover and restore the natural balance of the ecosystem.

It would also ensure human activities around sharks and other sea life are monitored and effectively managed so as to avoid the harmful effects of overfishing, pollution, and other hazards caused by climate change. In addition to all this, it will allow for the better collection and sharing of data to inform and strengthen conservation of all marine life.

Considering that all the damage is being caused by humans, it is our responsibility to work together to find a way that we can coexist with nature instead of destroying it. You have the chance to enable this by pushing for a Global Ocean Treaty with sufficient protection for designated marine areas in March in New York and at your One Planet Summit for the Ocean on February 9th.

All the research and the studies and the papers have been done. Now is the time for real action. I entreat you to use your power as the President of France and chair of the EU Presidency to get this vital and groundbreaking step towards a better future agreed by the European Union and adopted by the UN. Not just for the sharks, but for the whole planet. Thank you.

*Yours,
Eva O'Donnell*

⁷ <https://www.un.org/bbnj/>

⁸ <http://www.sharkleague.org/2021/11/23/press-release-endangered-mako-sharks-get-a-break/>

⁹ <https://www.greenpeace.org/international/publication/22700/sharks-under-attack/>

cc

President of the European Commission, Ursula Von Der Leyen

European Commissioner for the Environment, Oceans and Fisheries, Virginijus Sinkevičius

An Taoiseach, Micheál Martin

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications and Minister for Transport, Eamon Ryan

Minister of State for Heritage and Electoral Reform, Malcolm Noonan