

Dying for a Bowl of Soup: The global scandal of shark finning

According to some estimates, between 50 and 100 million sharks are killed each year around the world. The IUCN estimates that 80% of the reported global shark catch is caught by only 20 countries. Of these, five countries - Indonesia, Taiwan, India, Spain and the US - are responsible for 40% of the catch. Many of these sharks are unwanted, unintended "bycatch" by vessels fishing for high-value species such as swordfish and tuna, but sharks are increasingly a target catch for their extremely valuable fins.

Every year, millions of sharks have their fins cut off and are then thrown back into the water, dead or dying. The reason for this is the burgeoning market for shark fin soup, a traditional dish in east Asia. Shark meat is of low commercial value so, rather than use up limited space in the freezers that could be used for high-value fish, the sharks are discarded after the removal of their fins. This wasteful practice has contributed greatly to the decline of most large shark species during the past half-century.

Wasting the Ocean

Overfishing of sharks poses a significant threat to marine ecosystems, since it removes the "lions and tigers" of the ocean. The collapse of shark populations, as well as that of other large predators, is likely to have serious consequences for many other species in the ecosystems they inhabit. Predictive modelling and on-board observations suggest that some ecosystem changes may already have occurred as a result of the removal of large numbers of sharks.

Shark Declines

The 2006 Red List list of shark species published by the World Conservation Union listed 547 species of shark and ray. Of these, 110 species are either critically endangered (19), endangered (25) or vulnerable (66), while a further 96 are facing some level of threat. However, there are 205 species of shark or ray for which there are insufficient data to make an assessment, and it is likely that many of these are seriously threatened.

In addition, the effects of unsustainable international trade in the products of some species has prompted the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) to list the great white, basking and whale shark on Appendix II, which imposes restrictions on international commerce in those species.

Some of the species in peril

89% decline in hammerhead sharks in the NW Atlantic since 1988
80% decline in thresher sharks in the NW Atlantic since 1988
79% decline in great white sharks in the NW Atlantic since 1988
65% decline in tiger sharks in the NW Atlantic since 1986
60% decline in blue sharks in the NW Atlantic since 1988
99% decline in oceanic white tip sharks in the Gulf of Mexico since the 1950s
90% decline in oceanic silky sharks in the Gulf of Mexico since the 1950s
60% decline in relative abundance of all sharks in Costa Rican waters in the last 10 years

In the Northwest Atlantic, all recorded shark species, with only one exception, have declined by more than 50% since 1988.

Shark Fin Soup

While shark fin has no nutritional value or flavor, it does provide texture to soup, not to mention handsome profits to an industry estimated to be worth \$500 million per year. Fins are dried, de-skinned, boiled and sometimes bleached, and then made into soup by the addition of chicken or fish stock, which provides the flavor. Certain species are considered more valuable because of the length and thickness of the “fin needles” that they contain.

Until the 1980s the consumption of shark fin soup was discouraged in China. However, the Chinese government relaxed its attitude towards the consumption of what had been seen as an elitist dish, and consumption soared. Mainland China is now the world’s biggest end-market for shark fin: the effect on shark populations has been disastrous.

A bowl of shark fin soup can sell for as much as \$100, depending on the quality of the fins. Because of its perceived value, serving shark fin soup at private functions is a way of honoring one’s guests and signaling one’s wealth and status. Chinese people frequently express the view that no self-respecting host would ever leave shark fin soup off the menu, particularly at weddings and other important social functions, for fear of losing face.

White Gold

The international trade in shark fins has generated a highly lucrative industry in east Asia. Many shark fin dealers have multi-million dollar annual turnovers. Global Customs data show that over 100 countries are involved in the shark fin trade, the majority of them being producers. The main consumer countries in Asia are mainland China, Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, Malaysia and Thailand, but large volumes of shark fins are also imported into the US and the EU, to supply local Chinese communities.

The high commercial value of shark fins has led to gangland murders, with one fin trader killing another to warn others off his “patch”. In some parts of the world, mafia-style organisations, such as the Chinese Triads, are in complete control of the trade

Illegal Activity

There have been numerous seizures of illegal shark fins around the world. In some cases, the sharks were caught in areas where shark fishing is prohibited. In other cases, the vessels were apprehended in areas where finning is illegal and were found to be carrying only fins, or insufficient shark carcasses to account for the number of fins on board – in other words, the sharks had been finned.

Some countries, such as Ecuador and Costa Rica, have strong shark finning regulations but lack the resources or the political will to enforce them. As a result, sharks are often finned in totally protected sea areas where all shark fishing is banned. In such cases, the many seizures that have taken place are likely to represent only the tip of the iceberg.

In the US, recent Coast Guard actions against shark finning vessels have uncovered large shipments of illegal and unreported shark fins.

Mercury with Your Soup?

Laboratory tests in Hong Kong and Thailand have uncovered levels of mercury in shark fins that far exceed recommended safe levels. Mercury is a neurotoxin that can cause extensive damage to the nervous system and to fetuses. The increasing consumption of shark fin soup is may well cause widespread public health problems resulting from mercury poisoning.

Existing Regulations

The first multi-lateral organization to address the issue of shark finning was the UN Food and Agriculture Organization which, in 1999, produced its International Plan of Action for Sharks. This plan recommended the full utilization of sharks. Since then, the UN General Assembly and some Regional Fisheries Management Organizations have issued recommendations that sharks should not be killed for their fins and should be fully utilized. While none of these recommendations is legally binding, these recommendations serve to highlight the problem of finning and to remind member nations of their responsibility to conserve sharks.

A number of individual countries have also banned finning, and these national bans do have a legal basis. In some cases, only whole sharks may be landed. In other cases, the ban amounts to a rule that a vessel may not land shark fins that weigh more than 5% of the “dressed” weight of the sharks: that is, the weight of the carcass after the removal of the head and guts. However, the European Union’s regulations allow the landing of fins that weigh 5% of the **whole** weight of the shark. While this may seem a minor point, it does, in fact, make a very great difference to the number of sharks that are actually finned, because a shark’s liver is extremely heavy in relation to its body weight. Some have argued that the EU’s rule allows two sharks to be finned for every three that are caught.

Costa Rica is the only country in the world that prohibits the removal of fins from carcasses until they have been landed at the dockside. However, because privately-owned docks proliferate in Costa Rica, the rule is routinely flouted, away from the prying eyes of fisheries inspectors. Conservation organizations in Costa Rica have secretly filmed Taiwanese vessels inside these docks, landing sacks of shark fins without carcasses.

The Next Steps

While the recommendations issued to date have helped considerably to encourage countries to understand the effect that widespread finning has on shark populations, more must be done. First, with regard to the Regional Fisheries Management Organizations, the geographical “gaps” must be filled, in order to cover as many of the world’s sea areas as possible. Second, only a very small number of countries have banned finning, and many more need to be encouraged to enact legislation. Third, those recommendations that are weak or open to interpretation need to be re-issued with much more specific language. Finally, the consumption of shark products should be discouraged in all countries.

With regard to the enforcement of existing regulations, Regional Fisheries Management Organizations and national governments must require on board observers, Vessel Monitoring Systems, and dockside inspections to ensure compliance. Those companies and vessels that violate the regulations should be fined and prohibited from fishing.

Protecting Public Health

Individual governments and the World Health Organization need to issue public health advisories against consuming shark fin soup due to the risk of mercury poisoning. While some governments have issued warnings about mercury in shark meat it is important that the general public understand the risk to their health from consuming shark fin soup.

What You Can Do

1. Don't consume any shark products.
2. If you live in a maritime country that permits finning, write to your fisheries officials and ask them to enact legislation prohibiting shark finning and to set aside sufficient resources to enforce them.
3. Write to the consulates or embassies of countries that are marine tourism destinations and tell them that you will not travel to their country until they ban shark finning.

The countries/regions that have shark finning regulations are:

American Samoa
Australia (most States and Territories)
Brazil
Canada
Costa Rica
Ecuador
European Union
Nicaragua
Oman
Palau
Panama
Seychelles (foreign vessels only)
South Africa (in national waters only)
USA

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