



**HUMANE SOCIETY
INTERNATIONAL**

Shark Finning Questions and Answers

What is shark finning?

The word “finning” refers to the act of cutting off a shark’s fins and throwing the rest of the shark back into the sea. In many cases, the shark is still living when this occurs. The vast majority of finned sharks bleed to death, or become prey for other sharks, but there have been some recorded incidents in the US of “sport” fishermen catching live sharks that have somehow managed to survive being finned. However, such macabre incidents are rare.

A shark cannot be “finned” at port, as the term includes the act of throwing the body back into the sea.

The “fins-attached” method of enforcing finning bans requires that sharks are brought to land with their fins naturally attached to their bodies. This ensures that the sharks have not been finned and limits the number of sharks a vessel can kill because whole sharks take up more of the limited storage space.

How many sharks are finned each year?

Naturally, finning is not an activity that captains and crews are keen to report, so there are no official figures on shark finning. However, taking into account the wide discrepancy between the number of sharks reported as caught and the recorded imports of shark fins into East Asia, the World Conservation Union (IUCN) has estimated that tens of millions of sharks are finned every year.

Is shark finning banned in the U.S. and the EU?

In the US, shark finning was first banned by an Act of Congress in 2000. Under the act, fins could be separated from carcasses at sea, but when landed the fins were to weigh no more than 5% of the “dressed” weight of the shark - that is, the carcass without its head or guts. This law was riddled with loopholes and US NGOs, including HSI, worked hard to get the law strengthened. This has now happened with the enactment of the Shark Conservation Act in January 2011. Under the new regulations, fins must now be left attached to the carcass until the sharks are landed at port. This will eliminate the possibility of cheating the system.

The EU enacted shark finning regulations in 2003, but with one significant difference: fins landed separately from carcasses must weigh no more than 5% of the *whole* weight of the shark. Because a shark’s head and, in particular, its liver, are very heavy in relation to the rest of its body, this difference is very important. It means that boat crews can fin many more sharks while still being able to conform to the 5% rule. Not only that, but fins and carcasses may be landed at separate ports, thus ensuring that the already weak rules are unenforceable. In 2011 and 2012, the European Commission will evaluate the current regulation and one of the options is to adopt “fins-attached” regulations. HSI is lobbying hard for this option, because leaving fins attached to carcasses up to the first point of landing is the only way to ensure that sharks are not finned. NGOs are strongly supported in this initiative by Members of the EU parliament. Over 420 of them have now signed a Written Declaration requesting that the Commission adopt fins-attached regulation, and this show of strength means that a formal resolution will now go forward to the Commission, thus adding to the pressure.

To date, most of the regional fisheries management organizations (RFMOs)¹ covering large areas of the world's oceans, have issued recommendations against shark finning. While most of these are not legally binding, they serve to focus the minds of their individual member nations on the need for legally-binding domestic finning regulations.

Why is finning harmful?

Firstly, it means that fishing vessels can catch more sharks than they otherwise would, thus imperilling shark species even more. If crews are not required to keep and freeze shark carcasses, they can continue catching and finning sharks long after their freezers are full, whether they're full of sharks or of high-value species such as tuna. All they need is deck-space, sun and air to dry the fins. This means that sharks can be caught in totally unsustainable volumes.

Secondly, because they are at – or near – the top of the food chain, the disappearance of sharks is likely to have devastating consequences for other fish species in the chain. Predictive modelling has shown that other fish, even those that are the normal prey of sharks, could experience total population crashes. New research on “cascade effects” in the coastal north-west Atlantic, published in March 2007, showed a significant decline in abundance of all the large shark species that prey on smaller elasmobranchs, such as rays, skates, and small sharks, during the past 35 years. As a result, there has been a significant increase in abundance of their prey species, including the cownose ray, which preys on scallops. This has resulted in predation of scallops of such magnitude that a century-old scallop fishery has been forced to close. It seems likely that there will be many more reports of fishery closures in the years to come, resulting directly from over-harvesting of sharks.

Thirdly, since it is difficult - and, in many cases, impossible - to identify a shark species by observing its severed fins, and to identify a species by observing its carcass alone, shark management is severely impacted by the removal of sharks' fins at sea. The species composition of shark catches is instrumental in assessing exploitation levels for each species, as well as for evaluating the health of shark stocks. If all sharks were landed with their fins attached, far better management practices could be implemented.

Finally, there are millions of people in the developing world for whom sharks are an important source of protein. Poor coastal communities, usually fishing in small wooden boats, cannot compete with the large industrial vessels that are finning sharks only a few kilometres out to sea. In the past few years, such communities – in Africa, Latin America and India – have reported precipitous declines in their shark catches. Fewer and fewer sharks are swimming into the nearshore waters where such communities can catch them: instead, they are rotting on the seabed. It is no coincidence that the first multi-lateral body to urge an end to shark finning was not a conservation body, but the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation.

Which sharks are most often used for the fin trade?

Recent DNA studies of shark fins in trade show that blue sharks comprise about 17% of the total sharks used for the fin trade. Since blue sharks are the species most commonly caught by longline fisheries, and are considered one of the most biologically productive sharks, this has not generated much concern until recently. However, recent scientific reports have found that as many as 20 million blue sharks are killed annually and that the population is in decline. A Japanese study found that blue sharks had experienced a 75-86% decline from 1945 -1987 and other studies show that the catch of blue sharks since then has declined by 60% in the Northwest Atlantic.

In addition to blue sharks, DNA tests identified a number of others commonly used for shark fin soup including the hammerhead, shortfin mako, silky, sandbar, bull and thresher shark.

¹ The Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission, International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas, Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organization, Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission and Indian Ocean Tuna Commission have nearly identical recommendations regarding shark finning at sea. Under these rules, fins may be removed at sea but fins and carcasses must both be landed and must adhere to the 5% rule, at least at the first point at which they are unloaded. However, the recommendations do not make clear whether the weight ratio is based on dressed or whole sharks.

Is there an alternative to using real shark fins for shark fin soup?

Although various alternatives have been promoted in Asia, they have not achieved widespread popularity. The main reason is that they lack the historical cachet of shark fin soup, a dish that was once the sole preserve of Emperors and that, for two thousand years, has enjoyed the reputation of symbolizing great wealth and power. The low-level acceptance of alternatives is certainly not based on a preference for the flavor of real shark fins, since they have none. Flavor is imparted to shark fin soup by the addition of chicken or fish stock.

So what will work in the consuming countries?

One really positive thing that has happened in the past five years or so is that large numbers of Asian, in particular Chinese, organizations and individuals in a number of major consuming States have picked up on this issue and have begun to wage strenuous campaigns against the consumption of shark fin soup. This is a very encouraging sign, and it demolishes the myth that only Westerners care about sharks. Once people understand how vulnerable sharks are, how much we need them and how fast they're disappearing, attitudes can and do change. There have been reports of scuba-diving couples getting married underwater in Singapore – to highlight the plight of sharks, and of young people dressed as sharks running marathons in Hong Kong – only to get “finned” on the finishing line. Some Ministries in Southeast Asia have decided to stop serving shark fin soup at their official functions and a number of leading businesses, hotels and restaurants have taken it off the menu. These are all very positive signs and HSI is actively encouraging such actions and collaborating closely with local shark advocates. Chinese and other Asian communities around the world have the ability to turn the tide and bring about a drastic decline in the consumption of shark fin soup. The only question is: can they do it in time?

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