

Shark Finning: A social science approach that works

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Despite internationally implemented shark finning bans the volume of shark fins traded globally does not appear to have been significantly reduced¹. As the Chinese economy grows and demand for shark fin soup increases, shark finning will remain a lucrative practice for fishers worldwide which casts doubts on the effectiveness of current bans as the only strategy to deter shark finning. The recent successes of awareness campaigns along with the changing attitudes and beliefs of the younger Chinese generations demonstrate a promising area of focus for alternative management methods. The **aim** of this policy brief is to advocate the use of a social science approach to help change individual's attitudes toward shark fin consumption.

What is the problem?

Shark finning refers to the removal and retention of shark fins and the discarding of the carcass. An estimated 100 million sharks are killed each year, with up to 73 million fins being used for shark fin soup primarily to supply Chinese markets². Currently, the estimated average exploitation rate for sharks killed per year exceeds the average rebound rate for many shark populations.¹ At this rate, the demand for shark fins could soon outpace the abilities of sharks to reproduce leading to extinction.

Why is this important?

Nearly $\frac{1}{3}$ of pelagic shark species are considered threatened by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature. As apex predators, sharks are keystone species for many marine environments, their loss has already proven to have severe cascading effects on oceanic ecosystems. Over the last 35 years as abundances of all 11 great sharks have declined prey species have increased. A poignant example being the Cownose ray whose enhanced predation on bay scallop was sufficient to terminate a century-long scallop fishery.³

Recommendations

- Focus on demand reduction strategies
- Design awareness campaigns to stimulate need for action and change attitudes and beliefs toward shark fin consumption
- Implement government product bans



Why is an alternative strategy needed?

Shark finning has affected the conservation status of shark species worldwide, leading several countries to adopt shark-finning bans in their national waters.² Unfortunately despite these international efforts, the volume of shark fins traded globally does not appear to have been significantly reduced.¹ The high prices for fins from the Asian market help maintain the international black-market and poaching.⁵

Policy Recommendations

Because specific cultural beliefs associated with shark fin consumption are a main driver for international exploitation, a successful management approach to shark finning should recognize that unless the behavior of Chinese/Hong Kong consumers will change, the demand for shark fins may not decrease.⁵ Several consumer awareness campaigns that focus on demand reduction have shown to be very successful (see box 1). Surveys have shown that the more people learn about the consequences of eating shark fin soup, the less they want to participate in the trade (see box 2). A focus on demand reduction through use of awareness campaigns and government product bans could help make shark fin commercially extinct, rather than actually extinct.

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Box 1 Case Study: In 2006, WildAid began a culturally sensitive and celebrity driven multimedia campaign focused on shark fin demand reduction. Since then they have seen:

- **82%** decline in sales reported by shark fin vendors in Guangzhou (the center of shark fin trade in China).⁴
- **19 of 20** interviewed Beijing restaurants said sales of shark fin soup had declined.⁴
- **80%** decline in prices paid to fishermen from 2007 levels in Tanjung Luar and Lombok in Indonesia.⁴

Box 2 2011 Bloom Association Survey:

A survey by the Bloom Association, found that despite shark fin soup's central place in Cantonese cuisine:

- **66%** of Hong Kong diners said they were uncomfortable with the idea of eating an endangered species.⁶
- **¾** said they would not mind if it was removed from banquet menus.⁶
- **88%** of individuals believed the HK government should prohibit the sale of products that involve killing endangered species.⁶

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