

# Without a Fin to Stand On:

*How cultural perceptions are driving sharks to extinction for a bowl of stringy soup*

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I'm staring blankly at a stack of shark fins in bottle. The label screams out \$280.00/lb, and I'm thinking this has to be a misprint, but my trusty Chinese-American sidekick Peng assures me it's not, and rushes me out of the shop before I start asking too many questions. Besides, we need to choose a dinner destination amid the bustle of San Francisco's Chinatown district before the rush of tourists descend. Peng has reluctantly agreed to accompany me on a mission to find out what is behind the rising trend in Asian cultural cuisine known as shark-fin soup. What is driving the rapid rise of shark finning for this



Chinese delicacy, a heinous practice where a shark's dorsal fin is cut off and then the rest of the still living animal is thrown overboard to drown? According to WildAid.org, up to 73 million sharks are killed for shark-fin soup each year, resulting in the recent collapse of shark populations worldwide.

As we are seated for dinner among a smattering of locals and more adventurous tourists in an upscale restaurant, I wonder how many shark fins are consumed here over the course of a weekend? California is the top consumer of this stuff outside of Asia, which makes sense when you consider the ethnic concentrations on this side of the Pacific Rim. Some menus I've seen feature several different varieties of shark-fin soup, but tonight it is nowhere to be found. Peng explains that here you have to order if "off the menu," and we soon find out from our server that it is double the price of any other soup on the menu. If I'm going to pass up other house specialities such as the live lobster we spied in the lobby, this better be worth it.

But wait a second. How did we get here, ordering exotic live animals, shark fin or 50 kinds of sushi from a list of items that spans the globe? Quite simply (outside of

cheap oil), it's because humans eat anything and everything, an issue anthropologists and leading food authors like Michael Pollan call the "Omnivore's Dilemma." His 2006 book with that title begs the question, "What should we have for dinner [when we can eat almost anything], and are faced with a bewildering and treacherous food landscape?" Well, it doesn't get any more treacherous than this, as I reluctantly wade into the water and order the outrageously expensive and mercury-laden bowl of their best shark-fin soup.

After our order is placed, I wonder how a human being ever thought to try and eat a shark's fin. From what I've been able to gather outside of consulting the ancient texts, here's the story: "For a couple of millennia this soup was a regional delicacy in the Guangdong province of China...a steaming luxury for a rich and powerful few who, charmed by its rareness and exclusivity, imbued it with all manner of mythical virtues. It's said to nourish the blood, strengthen the waist, improve a woman's complexion, and make a soft penis hard." (Miles, 2006). There's also a more modern (and equally false) myth that sharks don't get cancer, and so by eating the fins, humans might be able to magically transfer this immunity to themselves. In the 20th century, after a "loose ban during the Mao era, where it was considered a bourgeois delicacy" (Kettles, 2011), the elitist practice was "politically rehabilitated" in the late 1980s.

What the cultural cocktail of benefits fails to mention is that shark-fin soup has sky-high levels of mercury, no nutritional value outside of protein, tastes bland and slimy by most objective accounts, and will deal a death blow to a keystone species that will have major impacts on already-imperiled ocean ecosystems. "Contrary to the myth that shark fins are nutritional, shark fins have mercury levels up to 42x higher than the safe limit." (WildAid, 2007). There's also this: "The impact of the methyl mercury found in all shark products and the irreversible, neurological damage it can have, as well as the use of industrial-grade hydrogen peroxide to process shark fins, are also becoming better known." (Kettles, 2011). So we can add both ancient and cultural mythmaking to the reasons behind the rise of shark fins as dinner, but scratch any real health benefits from the reasons people eat this slimy stuff.

Could the perceptions around sharks themselves, those predatory and deadly monsters from the ("Jaws") movies, be a contributing factor in this drive to eat them into



an early extinction? It surely doesn't help. A CNN story put it this way: "There is no animal on Earth more vilified than the shark. Pop culture references and annual, over-hyped reports of attacks on swimmers or surfers have put sharks on the top of the list of the world's most feared living things." (Ling, 2008). Human fears are central to this perceptible blind spot: "We

are scared of sharks and that makes it easier to justify both their indiscriminate slaughter, and our errant ability to ignore the consequences of our actions. We seek to punish sharks because they are the very incarnation of our fears.. it's not human nature to protect what [we] fear." (Kettles, 2011). Even with increased knowledge, our initial perception of sharks seem to stay rooted in fear: "...No matter how compelling the evidence about finning, or the questionable nutritional value of shark-fin soup, the question remains whether sharks can mobilize opinion in the same way more appealing animals such as the panda can?... No doubt if the soup was made from dolphin dorsal fin or panda ears, the campaigners' success would be a fait accompli." (Kettles, 2011).

And yet, in some quarters, the perception of sharks is changing: In the compelling 2006 documentary *Sharkwater: The Truth will Surface*, writer/director Rob Stewart shares the new reality of swimming with sharks: "You're underwater, and you see the thing that you were taught your whole life to fear, and it doesn't want to hurt you, and it's the most beautiful thing you've ever seen, and your whole world changes." This is the power of perception, and it cuts both ways. But in China, the old perceptions around the shark (if you'll pardon the pun) run very deep.

Back in Chinatown, I begin to question the wisdom of this impending taste-test over green tea and spring rolls with Peng, as I recall what I've learned about how the shark fin gets from ocean to table. It isn't pretty.

In a patrol-boat trip to the Galapagos Islands, a magazine reporter describes finning not as a type of fishing but as a mafia-style murder: "The shark poachers...have

been out at sea for hours already, slicing fins away with machetes, dumping the shark carcasses overboard like victims of a gangland hit." (Miles, 2006). While hammerheads are preferred, neither poachers nor end consumers discriminate, so nearly all shark species are negatively impacted. Indonesia, India and the EU reportedly take in the most shark fins, with the chunk of the catch going to Hong Kong (58%) and China (36%). (Tan, 2011). In all, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization estimates up to a 100 million sharks, skates, and rays, die each year. (Miles, 2006).

But even these alarming numbers are likely an undercount, with most of the killing taking place on the high seas, far from international monitoring. "Compared to other commercial fisheries, the shark-fin industry is opaque, secretive, and often operates in a legal grey area, exploiting loopholes in anti-finning laws and keeping few records," according to the Save Our Seas Foundation. Perception of sharks and the vast distant oceans where they live also lead to different rules. A fisherman in Costa Rica has compared the practice of finning to cutting the limbs off a lion and leaving it to die on the African savannah. And WildAid co-founder Peter Knights asked, "Can you imagine if it was Yellowstone Park and people were shooting up grizzlies? No one would ever get away with it. But this ocean, because it's out of sight - out of mind, [shark finning] carries on."

After the fin is sliced off, 98% of the often still living shark is thrown overboard and left to drown. This leaves much more room on board for the profitable contraband, and leads to even more killings. The boats dock with just fins to unload in the dozens of countries where this is still legal, dry them out of sight on rooftops, and then sell them to the shops to collect their pirate booty. And the ocean environment is starting to feel the impact of this practice. With sharks at the apex of the marine food web, "their depletion can drastically impact the rest of the ecosystem...Sharks are slow-growing, late-maturing, long-lived and give birth to few young, making them especially vulnerable to overfishing." (WildAid, 2007).

Once mainly netted as "by-catch", the high value of their fins now makes sharks a prized pursuit. According to WildAid.org, "Fins can sell for as much as \$880 per pound, making it one of the most expensive seafood products in the world." This translates into



massive profits for the poachers, and when it hits the restaurant table, up to a \$100 price tag for the high-end "Superior" style of shark-fin soup.

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ly, its

found popularity has also driven it "down-market," with an upper middle-class version of shredded shark fin going for closer to \$20 a bowl. Though the economics of finning is a highly visible motivator, the cultural demand for the "product" is really in the driver's seat. WildAid's Peter Knights agrees: "People wouldn't go out and fin sharks if no one wanted to buy shark-fin soup. Just like the drug trade, it's difficult to stop...without stopping the demand." (Miles, 2006).

And that demand has grown with the accelerated rise of China and the rapid expansion of East Asian economies: "Twenty years ago shark finning was rare, limited to the waters off a few Asian countries. But as demand for shark-fin soup has exploded, so has the cruel practice, which is still legal in international waters." (Miles, 2006). And there is more concern on the horizon: "In the next 10 years there will be up to 250 million relatively middle-class urban-living people with disposable income in a highly aspirational culture, where the need and social benefits of showing off wealth are high. This will mean a potentially higher demand for shark-fin soup because of the status it confers on both the giver and receiver." (Kettles, 2011). This is born out by some recent numbers. A WildAid 2007 survey found that 35% of Chinese urbanites had indulged in

the past year, and their report concluded that, "what began as a rare and expensive delicacy is now standard fare at most weddings and corporate functions."

Today, while the perceptions around shark fin as health tonic have largely gone by the wayside, it now has new associations, and is typically served at weddings and banquets to demonstrate a host's good fortune. "Shark fin is often eaten at weddings to mark the importance of the occasion and impress the couple's extended families and friends." (Ling, 2008). Chinese columnist Liling Tan adds, "In Asia and Asian communities worldwide, it remains a popular dish because of an association with prestige and privilege. As more and more Chinese and other Asians ascend to the middle class, eating shark-fin soup is associated with their new found socio-economic status... Despite growing attention, shark-fin soup still continues to be popular and prevalent in Asia, taking centerstage in a culture where food symbolizes a great number of things, among them prosperity, virility, health and happiness." (Tan, 2011).

In a 2011 reality-TV segment that turned into a piece of pseudo-investigative journalism around perceptions, celebrity chef Gordon Ramsay was able to ask VIP guests at an exclusive Taiwanese restaurant why they were willing to shell out top dollar for a bowl of the stuff. They cited the delicious taste of it even though the expert chef concluded that "it tastes of nothing." The patrons seemed uninformed and unconcerned about the cruel practice of finning and its impact, preferring instead to focus on the special event at hand, their mother's birthday celebration. Ramsey commented later on their perceptions as key to their behavior: "The sad news is they rely on their history, almost as a tradition from their parents and their grandparents to say - [snaps] - Go eat this 'cause it's a symbol of status."

But it's not an all sad news story. There is a strong counter-current of conservation groups trying to stop the practice of shark finning and the consumption of shark-fin soup. WildAid.org is a leading voice here. The practice of shark finning fits squarely within its organizational mission to stop the illegal wildlife trade, and its slogan, "If the buying stops, the killing can too" clearly addresses the demand side of the equation. WildAid claims to have cut shark-fin consumption by 25-30% in Asian countries like Singapore, Thailand and Taiwan through its awareness campaigns. To try and stem the demand, WildAid employs Asian celebrities like NBA notable Yao Ming and movie star

Jackie Chan to film public service announcements decrying the practice of finning. And WildAid publishes creative public awareness campaigns both in English and Chinese. Some of these campaigns are quite compelling, such as the alternative recipe "Eight Steps to a Bowl of Shark's Fin Soup" that includes Step Six: Believe the Myth.

New laws and regulations are also being enacted to end finning. On the supply/fishing side, 60 nations currently outlaw the practice, including the United States, which imposed its first ban in 2000. Canada and the EU are moving in this direction as well. These laws usually require that all sharks be landed in port with their fins attached. "In a major development, Taiwan announced this October [2011], that it would impose a



ban in 2012 on shark finning... The act would make Taiwan the first Asian country to introduce such regulation. (Tan, 2011).

On the demand/consumption side, "Within the past year, shark fin [trade] bans have been enacted in

California, Oregon, Hawaii, and Washington, thereby shutting off the shark fin trade along the entire U.S. Pacific Coastline." (WildAid, 2011). But it's the California law that may have the biggest impact. The Golden State is home to 1.1 million Chinese-Americans, and is one of the largest importers of shark fins outside Asia. San Diego and Los Angeles are two of the top U.S. entry points for imported shark fin according to a 2005 report to Congress by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).

The goal of the California law is, "To save sharks and the oceans by banning the possession, sale, trade and distribution of shark fins." It is aimed squarely at the demand side, by trying to "eliminate the market for fins by prohibiting their sale." Governor Jerry Brown signed the bill into law in 2011, and the ban is set to go into effect on January 1, 2013. Before it was signed into law, the bill had split the Asian delegation in the California Legislature. Some members stressed the shark conservation benefits, while others claimed the bill smacked of a racially-motivated attack on Chinese cultural ways. (Those employing such twisted logic should remember that human slavery was



once also an established custom.)

But even with new laws in place, it remains to be seen how widely they will be enforced. It has often been said that, "Laws without enforcement are merely ink on paper, the fiction of good intentions" (Miles, 2006). And without vigilant enforcement, the consumption of shark-fin soup may just lead to a new Prohibition-style black market, and remain available "off the menu," as my Chinatown experience demonstrates. This possibility makes it all the more important to try and stop the practice on the demand side, which means trying to change people's cultural perceptions.

Some parts of Asia are starting to get on the bus to ban shark-fin soup as well, a development that clearly shows some changing perceptions around this contentious issue. Peninsula Hotels, Asia's oldest hotel chain announced in late 2011 that they have taken shark-fin soup off the menu, but other hotel chains are not following suit for now, despite the objections of environmentalists and young people.

And there certainly seems to be a generational divide around the perceptions of finning and shark-fin soup in Asian communities. "The younger generation, the couples who are getting married, would prefer to steer away from shark's fin; But for their parents or in-laws would prefer to have the shark fin." (Whiteman, 2011). This would be a great avenue for further study.

There also seems to be a divide between Eastern and Western attitudes around the sustainability of practices like finning, and the evidence of some Chinese nationalism that influences Asian attitude around these issues: "I care about the sharks and how our love for their fins is endangering their survival. However, at the time of that wedding in Singapore, my concern was regarded by my relatives and peers as a very foreign concept reserved largely for western environmentalists and their westernized and disrespectful Asian supporters." (Tan, 2011).

But overall, there are some hopeful signs of progress to end shark finning. A reported encounter after a WildAid speech revealed that we may be close to a "tipping point" in the campaign against shark-fin products. "You must be having some effect, because the last three weddings I've been to [in Asia] didn't serve shark-fin soup. Which is like saying that the last three Thanksgiving dinners in America I attended

didn't serve turkey."

Back in Chinatown, my shark-fin soup is getting cold. I am within earshot of a wedding rehearsal dinner in the banquet room, and can easily imagine what unsustainable cultural delicacy is likely featured on the menu. As for my own sample of stringy mercury-laden shark cartilage floating in broth, I heed the fortune-cookie advice that says, "acts of today will impact all your tomorrows," and push away the untouched claypot bowl. I only hope that, through a change in cultural perceptions, millions of Chinese are soon able to do the same.



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(Photos courtesy of Men's Journal, WildAid.org, Pew Environmental Group)