

The Market for Sharks

Let's get one thing straight – sharks are not out to get us. They are beautiful animals that have existed for more than 400 million years, making our mere 200,000 seem like an evolutionary blink.

But what about the death of the British honeymooner in the Seychelles last August? Tragic, yes, but in my opinion a totally freak accident. In fact, the odds of being killed by a shark are somewhere in the region of 700 million to one. Your chances of being murdered by a human are only 19,000 to one, so personally I'd take the shark risk any day of the week. And I spend plenty of time actively trying to find them – sharks that is – not murderers...

On average about 10 people are killed each year by sharks, including surfers accidentally mistaken for seals. If I explain that 791 people were killed last year by faulty electric toasters and 652 by falling off chairs, does that convince you of my point? I thought not. And that's part of the problem – most people have an irrational fear of sharks and care little about their conservation. The film *Jaws* has to take a good portion of blame for this and its author, Peter Benchley, who later devoted his life to conservation, said: "If I had known then what I know now about sharks, I would not have been able to write *Jaws*."

Look at it from the shark's point of view and it's undisputable. They are facing a human slaughter of such magnitude that there are serious concerns about the future of many species with serious implications on global marine habitats.

Sharks are the apex predators of our oceans and are crucial in maintaining the delicate balance of the world's marine ecosystems

A 10ft tiger shark gets a belly rub from a diver

One of the major reasons is an insatiable demand for shark fin soup in parts of the Far East. It's hard to evaluate the exact number of sharks being caught each year, as much of this activity happens illegally in waters that are impossible to monitor. The most accurate study to date was carried out by Dr Shelley Clarke, who used data from the world's biggest shark market in Hong Kong to estimate the total numbers of shark fins traded.

"My conclusion was that as of 2000, the fins of 38 million sharks per year were being traded through the fin markets, but that the number could range as low as 26 million or as high as 73 million," said Dr Clarke.

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Shark finning is a brutally cruel and wasteful practice. Many sharks have their fins sliced off and their carcass – still alive – tossed back into the sea where they bleed to death. Oceanic fishing fleets target valuable fish such as tuna, using thousands of baited hooks on long-line and freezing their catch on board. Unfortunately, long-liners often catch several times as many sharks than they do tuna. Until relatively recently, this shark 'bycatch' was considered a nuisance, and sharks were cut loose and allowed to swim away. However, as shark fins have become increasingly valuable, fewer sharks are being released.

Sharks are the apex predators of our oceans and are crucial in maintaining the delicate balance of the world's marine ecosystems. They help to keep other predator fish at a viable level and already there have been implications in areas with reduced shark populations. The Scripps Institution of Oceanography at the University of California studied what happened when sharks in the Caribbean were over fished. At first it almost looked like good news, as the fish that the sharks feed on significantly increased in number. But in turn, these fish prey on parrotfish, which graze on algae and are vital for keeping coral reefs healthy. "It appears that ecosystems such as coral



Whitetip sharks over coral reef



A diver swims with bull sharks

reefs need sharks to ensure the stability of the entire system," said Enric Sala, deputy director of the Centre for Marine Biodiversity and Conservation at Scripps. Healthy coral reefs are among the most biologically diverse and economically valuable ecosystems on our planet with an estimated 500 million people having some dependence on them.

Shark fin soup is a reasonably new 'delicacy'. I hate the word delicacy, but this is certainly how it's seen in parts of China. The actual fin has very little flavour and is used mainly to add a stringy texture to the soup, which is usually made from chicken or other stock. It has become a status symbol, served at important events such as weddings and business banquets as a show of wealth. And you certainly need to be rich to eat it – a single bowl can cost up to £100 in some restaurants. There are some claims that shark fin

soup has health properties such as improving kidneys, lungs and bones but there is no evidence to back this up.

With increased prosperity in the Far East, demand is booming, leading to a bounty on sharks around the globe. Customs data has shown that more than 100 countries have some involvement in trading shark fins. Most of these are exporters with the principal markets being China, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore and Taiwan. But don't think that this problem is confined to exotic parts of the world. The EU – particularly Spain – is one of the largest suppliers of shark fins to Asia and also imports significant quantities to supply local Chinese communities. Current EU legislation is too lenient to ensure that shark finning is not continuing undetected and a new proposal has just been announced to close loopholes in this policy. If adopted, it would ensure that all sharks



An underwater photographer swims with a whale shark

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Japanese fishermen cutting fins from live shark

taken by EU vessels are landed with their fins still attached to their bodies. Marine conservationists and scientists recommended this as the most reliable means of enforcing a finning ban. "Sharks have an intrinsic value to our marine environment and are highly vulnerable to man's activities – the fin trade being one of the greatest threats," said Ali Hood, director of conservation for the Shark Trust. "Adopting a 'fins naturally attached' policy would simplify the enforcement of the EU shark finning ban. Parallel efforts to introduce effective catch limits are also required if we are to prevent additional species from being taken to the brink."

What can you do to help ?

- Make a donation to The Shark Trust to help with its campaigns. Send a free ecard to your friends to raise awareness: www.sharktrust.org/ecards.asp
- Avoid any restaurants that have shark fin soup on their menu or supermarkets

that sell shark products. You can send a letter by downloading a template from the Bite Back website www.bite-back.com/campaigns/restaurant-campaign.htm

■ Support the international work of The Shark Research Institute (SRI), which lobbies at CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) for changes to the international laws regulating the shark finning industry, www.sharks.org. It is now illegal to possess, sell or trade shark fins in four US states and shark sanctuary zones have recently been established in Palau, Honduras, the Maldives and the Marshall Islands – but will the EU follow? Make your voice heard and sign the petition calling for changes to the EU shark finning legislation at sharkalliancepetition.org 

By Ian Wood
www.agoodplace.co.uk

THE SHARK RESEARCH INSTITUTE: EDUCATING THE SHARK CUSTODIANS OF THE FUTURE

The international trade of shark fins is the greatest threat to the survival of sharks. Hong Kong is the world's largest single market for shark fins, importing approximately 10 million kgs each year to satisfy the demand for shark fin soup. In a recent SRI campaign, 1,000 children living in Hong Kong signed a pledge not to eat shark fin. Watch this shocking film to see the horrific reality of what it takes to make a bowl of shark fin soup: www.sharks.org/about-sri/news-alerts.html and support The Shark Research Institute at www.sharks.org

BITE-BACK MARINE AND SHARK CONSERVATION – MAKE BRITAIN'S RETAILERS SHARK-FREE

Celebrity Bite-Back supporter, Bear Grylls, said: "... without sharks the oceans will rot, yet, alarmingly, 3,290 tonnes of shark meat and fins were traded in the UK last year". Join Bear Grylls, Gordon Ramsay, Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, Martin Clunes and Ben Fogle in support of this exciting shark and marine conservation charity and its mission to make Britain's retailers shark-free. Visit bite-back.com to make a donation and learn more about its innovative online campaigns. Copies of its stunning 2012 calendar are still available at bite-back.com/calendar2012

AFRICA DIVER: DIVING WITH SHARKS – CREATING A LIVING RESOURCE

Shark diving eco-tourism creates a sustainable industry and ensures that sharks are more valuable alive than dead – which in turn makes sharks an asset worth protecting. Africa Diver organises exhilarating shark diving safaris, bringing you face to face with a variety of shark species and giving you the unique opportunity to meet shark scientists and experts. Your shark safari directly contributes to shark conservation by supporting SRI and Bite-Back organisations. For more information visit www.africadiver.co.uk