

Shark's fin soup Also helps the Poor

'Each year, 73 million sharks are killed primarily for their fins to feed our increasing hunger for sharks fin soup.' WWF Singapore

'Humans kill 100 million sharks a year ...and for what? Shark fins for a tasteless bowl of soup.' Another wildlife organization

The basis for these statements originates from unknown sources, are magnified and reproduced ad nauseam. No data is given to support this. By repetition and media advertorials, the world is misled into believing that –

- 73 million sharks are killed specifically for their fins
- Most of the fins are cruelly taken from live sharks

Both statements are untrue. The truth is –

1. 80% of sharks are **accidentally** caught
2. Most fins are humanely taken from landed, **dead** sharks

Fishing

Shark is another fish in the ocean. In the debate over sharks, it is projected as if it is not part of the fishing industry. When the fisherman goes to sea, he will find in his nets all types of fish – shrimps, sharks, ordinary fish, squids. Fishermen in poor developing countries consume all the meat, or sell them in the local market. They are too hungry or poor to throw away the meat.

Global shark catch

Sharks are caught everywhere, and in different ways - artisanal fishing, commercial fishing by-catch, and targeted shark catch. Most of the sharks caught are by artisanal fishermen. Artisanal fishing is small commercial or subsistence fishing where bony fish, sharks and shrimps are caught in the fishing nets.

The UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) states that the global shark catch for 2009 is 720,000 tons. The popular figure ranges from 70-100 million sharks. For this article, I use 73 million (WWF figure)

Developing countries catch 70% of the sharks, equivalent to 53 million. The majority of sharks caught in developing countries are bycatch arising from small-scale fisheries.

Developed countries catch 30% of the sharks ie 20 million. Of the sharks caught by rich countries, a large portion is part of the catch from general fishing.

EU announced a plan in February 2009 to curtail the killing of millions of sharks by the 27 member countries for their meat, for example, in serving up fish-and-chips. It will mean the end of 'rock salmon' or 'huss' being sold at fish-and-chip shops as they are derived from spiny dogfish, an increasingly rare shark species. In Germany, shark meat is sold as 'See-Aal' (sea eel) and belly flaps are smoked to make 'Schillerlocken', a German delicacy. In France, fresh shark meat is sold as 'aiguillat commun' or 'saumonette d'aiguillat'.

In Australia, 'flake', a popular fish dish, is actually shark.

EU is the largest consumer of spiny dogfish (shark) meat, estimated to account for 65 per cent of the world landings. In Northeast Atlantic, Porbeagle sharks (eg *Lamna nasus*) have been fished in this region by many European countries. Norway began fishing *L. nasus* in the 1920s. The Mediteranean stock has disappeared.

Around 1960's traders from the East came to Europe. Before that, fins from the European catch were usually discarded because no one knew their value.

Sharks Accidentally Caught

- The table (see Annex) shows that developing countries are responsible for 70% of the global shark catch. This comes to 53 million sharks. The sharks only constitute part of a larger fish catch.

Fishing in their small boats, the fishermen are in no position to pick and choose the fish they catch. The sharks will of necessity not be large ones, such as the Great white shark or Basking shark. Whatever they get, they keep and sell. The fishermen are too poor and hungry to throw away the meat and retain the fins only.

India declared at the UN Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) meeting (May 2011) ‘**Sharks** In

India, Elasmobranchs (*sharks*) are mainly caught as by-catch by different fishing and trawling gear....”

Of the developing countries, Indonesia and India are the world’s top two shark catching countries. Indonesia lands 12% of the world’s catch. India is a close second. Together they take in nearly 25%. The other developing countries landing sharks are Argentina, Pakistan, Nigeria, Malaysia, Iran, Venezuela, and Tanzania (see Annex).

Countries in the ‘developing countries’ category are of various hues. Based on the views of fishing authorities of these countries, it is estimated that 10% of the catch come from targeted shark catch.

- Of the sharks caught by developed countries, a large portion is part of the catch arising from general fishing. Millions are also bycatch in the hunt for tuna. Spain catches the most (over 7 million sharks). US are a close second, landing 5 million a year (see Annex). One can hardly believe that EU and US catch sharks so that people can have shark fin soup.

In a response to an article I wrote in 2009, WWF agreed that overall fishing practices are to blame for the decline of sharks worldwide

- There is some targeted shark catching by developed countries. Spiny dogfish meat is highly valued, particularly in Europe. The European market targets mature females. The small fins of this shark enter international trade but are of low value.

The conclusion is that 80% of sharks are **accidentally** harvested –

- (a) Developing countries catch 70% of global shark catch. Being artisanal fishermen, most catch is accidental eg India. Estimate is 60% accidental catch and 10% targeted catch
- (b) Developed countries catch 30%. Estimate is 20% bycatch and 10% targeted catch

Total $60\% + 20\% = 80\%$.

Sharks Endangered?

The world is repeatedly told that sharks are endangered, and in a dire strait. The shark status is posited as equivalent to that of the orang utan, panda, gorilla,

elephants, and caviar. An examination of the facts, and practices of countries, shows otherwise.

1. There are more than 400 shark species. It is wrong to say that sharks are endangered. It is akin to saying birds are endangered. Some cockatoos are, but not crows and house sparrows. One has to identify the species considered endangered. New Zealand and Canada observe that the *Spiny dogfish shark* was the most abundant of all shark species. There are at least one billion such individuals. The US (in Dec 2011) stated that 'on the US West Coast, the blue shark population is healthy..'
2. Six species of sawfish are the only shark species listed in Appendix I of CITES. This means that this UN wildlife body does not consider the other sharks endangered.

Under CITES, 'Appendix I shall include all species threatened with extinction which are or may be affected by trade. Trade in specimens of these species must be subject to particularly strict regulation in order not to endanger further their survival and must only be authorized in exceptional circumstances.'

Whales, turtles, rhinoceroses, chimpanzees, and tigers are in the Appendix I list and therefore endangered and threatened with extinction. Being endangered, they are not allowed to be caught, eaten or sold in any country.

3. Of the 400 species of sharks, only three are listed in Appendix II of CITES. They are Basking shark, Great white shark, and the Whale shark. An Appendix II listing means that the three sharks can be caught, sold and traded, provided such use is sustainable and does not pose a threat to the species.
4. It would seem that no country considers sharks to be globally endangered. No country has proposed to list sharks in CITES Appendix I after the listing of the sawfish in 2007. This is not the case with other wildlife. At the last CITES Conference of the Parties (COP), Qatar, 2010, Monaco proposed that the Atlantic blue fin tuna be in Appendix I. This proposal was supported by

many countries. Only a few sharks were proposed to be listed in Appendix II. They were all rejected by the meeting.

- 5 All countries allow the catching and consumption of sharks. US, EU and other developed countries allow the capture of sharks and the consumption of their meat and other shark products. This suggests that sharks are not regarded as endangered.

The views of IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) on shark species have been much quoted. Whilst well respected, it should be remembered that IUCN is a non-government organization, like WWF and Greenpeace. Before governments and CITES make a decision, their views are taken into consideration. Hence sawfish and three shark species (and not other sharks) are listed in CITES.

Cruel Live Finning–Not the Norm

“Live finning” is the cutting of fins from a live shark. It is not the normal way of obtaining fins. It is irrational, physically dangerous and totally unnecessary for fishermen to “live fin”. It is easier to take fins from a dead, motionless fish.

The anti-fin group has deliberately misled the world into believing that “live finning” is prevalent and pervasive, and that this is the way all fins are obtained. This is achieved through aggressively flooding print, TV and internet media with vivid pictures of sharks being finned alive.

There are some minor exceptions. Some long-line fishing boats, principally targeting tuna, get in their fishing hooks the less valuable sharks. They cut the fins and throw the sharks into the water to make room for tuna. In other cases, there are fishing boats which get the fins in this barbaric manner. These cruel practices are being stopped by the 5% law (please see below)

The following pointers would support the premise that “live finning” is not the norm –

- We see that 70% of sharks (53 millions) are caught by developing countries. During fishing, fishermen will find shrimps, sharks, ordinary fish, and squids in their nets. All are landed, sold in the nearby markets and eaten. Fins from dead sharks are salvaged to be collected and sold to petty traders.

- We also see that developed countries catch nearly 30% of the global sharks. The top five shark catching nations among developed countries are Spain, US, France, Portugal and New Zealand. Collectively they land 16 million sharks. There should hardly be any “live finning” done by fishing boats of these countries since their governments would not allow such a cruel practice. In addition, the way sharks are caught by developed countries do not lend to such practices.
- It is not possible for 73 million sharks to be “live-finned”, as implied in TV footages. It will require millions of fishermen to do the job
- **5% law** Some fishing boats de-fin the dead shark on board and throw away the rest of the body. This is a wasteful practice. To reduce this, a number of countries has the 5% law.

The EU 5% law does not allow the landing of fins exceeding 5% of the live weight of the shark catch. The law is primarily concern with waste, not animal welfare. But it has a beneficial consequence.

EU has put up a proposal to member states to tighten its law and make it 0% ie sharks must be landed with their fins intact. Taiwan has passed laws in 2012 to ban shark finning.

Fins from “ live finning” forms a minute portion of all fins sold in the world. The campaign to ban shark fin soup because of the illegal action of a few is illogical.

If the practice by large fishing boats is widespread, as implied, the present penalty from violating the 5% law should be made severe.

Campaign to Ban Shark’s Fin Soup Discriminatory

The campaign to ban shark’s fin soup is culturally discriminatory. There is no similar movement for –

- **Spiny dogfish meat** is highly valued and eaten in Europe. There is no local or global campaign to stop the capture, sale or consumption of this shark.
- **Caviar** (sturgeons) is highly endangered. CITES lists sturgeons as endangered, with some in the endangered Appendix I list. But caviar is widely sold, and served at cocktails.
- **Atlantic blue fin tuna** At the last CITES meeting (2010), Monaco proposed that the Atlantic blue fin tuna should be in Appendix I of

CITES because it is highly endangered. There is no campaign to stop the sale of this and other tunas

- **Atlantic Salmon** over-fished by the millions

Three sharks

Three sharks are in the Appendix II list of CITES. At the present rate of uncontrolled general fishing, the three sharks (and other sharks) can be accidentally caught and traded, as an Appendix II listing allows their international trade.

There is therefore a need for FAO and fishery ministries and departments to step in to limit the catch of the three protected sharks.

Fishery authorities can adopt one or all of the following measures –

1. Do not allow boats to land protected sharks. Those accidentally caught or found in their fishing nets must be thrown back into the sea.
2. Boats on reaching ports and found to have protected sharks must throw back the catch even if those sharks are dead.
3. Every country should limit the number and quantity of protected shark sold, eaten or exported.
4. Recreational fishing of protected sharks, as permitted in some countries, should be stopped.
5. Laws like those in California should not only ban fin but other parts of the shark bodies.

As a leadership example, the US, EU and other developed countries should exercise better management and either stop or reduce harvests to allow depleted stocks to recover.

When it comes to developing countries, socio-economic considerations will make the enactment and enforcement of such regulations very difficult.

To quote Associate Professor Malcolm Tull, Murdoch University, Australia, in his study on Indonesia fisheries: ‘There is a risk that catch restrictions could have serious negative direct and indirect impacts on the livelihoods of artisanal fishers and their families, so it is suggested that a cautious approach be adopted, that is, any gear or catch limitations should start at low levels and be gradually phased in.’

The millions of dollars that NGO's get from foundations and public donations for their campaign against shark fin soup should be more productively channeled to developing countries to work on reducing shark catch.

Final words

1. 80% of sharks are accidentally caught. If shark's fin soup (SFS) is banned, the fins from these 60 million sharks will be discarded
2. 20% of sharks landed come from boats which go out to sea targeting sharks for their meat and fins. If SFS is banned, fins from 15 million sharks will be thrown away, but their meat retained and consumed
3. To control shark catch, FAO and government fishery ministries must take a direct and active role.
4. Shark fin consumption helps poor countries. If the fins are not consumed, they will have no value and will be wastefully discarded. The little but valuable income that poor fishermen get is lost.
5. Fins from "live finning" forms a minute portion of all fins sold in the world.

Conclusion

The campaign against shark's fin soup consumption is illogical, and hurts the livelihood of millions of fishermen in poor countries. If campaigners want to protect sharks, they should get their governments to ban shark catching.

Dr Choo-hoo GIAM, BVSc, MRCVS (England)
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Annex

FAO 2009 Global Shark Catch (tonnage)

Developing Countries

			%
1	Indonesia	88790	12.31
2	India	79193	10.98
3	Argentina	39952	5.54
4	Mexico	30305	4.20
5	Malaysia	22297	3.09
6	Brazil	21009	2.91
7	Nigeria	17970	2.49
8	Iran (Islamic Rep. of)	13342	1.85
9	Pakistan	13019	1.81
10	Korea, Republic of	12764	1.77
11	Thailand	9045	1.25
12	Libyan Arab Jamahiriya	8937	1.24
13	Peru	8692	1.21
14	Venezuela, Boliv Rep of	8431	1.17
15	Panama	7033	0.98
16	Senegal	6787	0.94
17	Ghana	6454	0.90
18	Yemen	5544	0.77
19	Oman	5478	0.76
20	Rest	88290	12.25
		493332	68.42

Developed Countries

			%
1	Spain	62157	8.62
2	United States of America	37069	5.14
3	Taiwan Province of China	29310	4.07
4	France	19498	2.70
5	Portugal	18614	2.58
6	New Zealand	16745	2.32
7	Japan	16467	2.28
8	Australia	8562	1.19
9	Canada	6619	0.92
10	United Kingdom	5111	0.71
11	Italy	1696	0.24
12	Ireland	1480	0.21
13	Iceland	1427	0.20
14	Norway	1239	0.17
15	Greece	966	0.13
16	Netherlands	477	0.07
17	Denmark	133	0.02
18	Sweden	82	0.01
19	Germany	27	0.00
		227679	31.58

Developing	493332	68.42
Developed	227679	31.58
Total	721011	100

(Source FAO)