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## Hong Kong and Vancouver researchers argue shark-fin soup must be abandoned to prevent shark extinction

by Craig Takeuchi on September 13th, 2018 at 3:15 PM

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Shark fin soup  
📍 GREENWATERMELON/GETTY IMAGES



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In the recent Chinese-U.S. blockbuster coproduction *The Meg*, a gargantuan prehistoric shark that's discovered in the ocean attacks beachgoers in China. With references to shark-fin soup, like all horror films, the film plays upon fears—not only of shark attacks but what will happen if shark populations continue to be killed off for the sake of a culinary speciality.

However, a new study has revealed how the decimation of shark populations for the consumption of luxury products is driving them to extinction—unless action is taken quickly.

Researchers from the University of Hong Kong (HKU), the University of British Columbia (UBC) research initiative Sea Around Us (at the Institute for Oceans and Fisheries), and WildAid Hong Kong published the study in the ocean-policy studies journal *Marine Policy* in September.

UHK professor and the study's lead author Yvonne Sadovy explained that the fins are the main ingredient for shark-fin soup served at banquets, weddings, Lunar New Year festivities, and fine-dining establishments in China and among Chinese diasporic populations.

“The exclusiveness linked to the product combined with its limited natural supply increases its price and makes it an attractive trading good for business networks, including for those with shady or illegal practices,” Sadovy stated.

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Braised shark fin GYRO/GETTY IMAGES

The study pinpoints both legal and illegal fisheries and the difficulties in enforcing sustainable fishing practices.

Researchers note that the majority of shark fin in global trade come from unmanaged fisheries in developing countries such as Indonesia (where annual shark catches are over 100,000 tonnes).

Thailand has been the top exporter of shark fins since 2016, catering to both Chinese and Thai customers and tourists.

Although India, Spain, and Taiwan also are all major players in the catch of sharks and sale of fins, the primary gateway for about half of all dried shark fins traded globally is Hong Kong, where they are usually exported to mainland China.

The number of dried shark fins imported in Hong Kong increased six times from 1960 to 2002, but began to decline by one-third of 1960 levels by 2016. According to Hong Kong government data, shark fin exports to mainland China dropped by 80 percent over the last decade.

Due to awareness campaigns and a ban on luxury seafood in government banquets in mainland China, younger generations of Chinese consumers have been to avoid shark fin soup or replace it with bird nests, artificial shark fins or other luxury seafood products, such as fish maw (dried swim bladder).

On the one hand, over 80 percent of banquet set menus in Hong Kong still include shark-fin dishes. However, the study notes that in Hong Kong, the government has banned shark fin to be sold at government functions, custom officials are trained to identify shark fins, and more businesses are removing shark fin from their menus or serving it only by request.

Pauly added that while desire for shark-fin soup is decreasing in Hong Kong and mainland China where young people are starting to see it as a cultural practice that is worth abandoning”, demand is increasing in places like Vietnam and Macau.



Braised fish maw in gravy JOBRESTFUL/GETTY IMAGES

The researchers are warning that the demand for shark catches have increased to unsustainable levels, with many shark populations being threatened by overfishing.

"*Sea Around Us* data show that shark catches amount to approximately 1.4 million tonnes per year, more than double what they were six decades ago," study co-author and *Sea Around Us* principal investigator Daniel Pauly stated in a news release. "This overexploitation has led to almost 60 per cent of shark species being threatened, the highest proportion among all vertebrate groups."

According to the study, 25,000 tonnes of dried shark fins come from unsustainable and illegal fisheries while only 4,300 tonnes of dried shark fins are produced sustainably every year.

Efforts to stem shark finning are hampered by the mixing of catches, which complicates attempts to trace the products; activity in open seas or remote ports, where there is little or no oversight; and authorities with limited resources, disinterest, or lack of political will.

"Experience has taught us that activities related to prestige or tradition, unless there are changes in such mindsets, may require dramatic regulatory actions with particularly strong regulations and this is at its most extreme when desirability and profits are very high and enforceability and natural productivity very low, as for shark fin, ivory and other examples," the study states.

"Society must draw a line between what is acceptable and what not when it comes to luxury, vulnerable, uncontrolled species, and shark fin soup is a prime example of a cultural practice that is worth abandoning," they add.

In Vancouver, the local Chinese Canadian organization Hua Foundation launched the [Shark Truth](#) program in 2009, to support sustainable seafood and to increase awareness, education, and action for sharks.

In the 2006 documentary *[Sharkwater](#)*, the late Canadian documentarian and conservationist Rob Stewart illuminated how sharks have been excessively demonized in representations in media, how exploitation and corruption is rife within shark-hunting industries, and how their decimation could eliminate the important role that sharks play in regulating sealife populations, thereby leading to unbalanced or collapsing ecosystems.



*Sharkwater Extinction* filmmaker and conservationist Rob Stewart

Stewart has followed up that film with the forthcoming release *Sharkwater: Extinction* to further detail the corruption that is driving sharks to extinction. Stewart died in a diving accident in January 2017 the Florida Keys during the making of the film but it was completed by the Rob Stewart Foundation.

The film will screen at the 2018 Vancouver International Film Festival on September 28 and 30.

You can follow Craig Takeuchi on Twitter at @cinecraig or on Facebook.

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