

# Ask Dr. Pauly

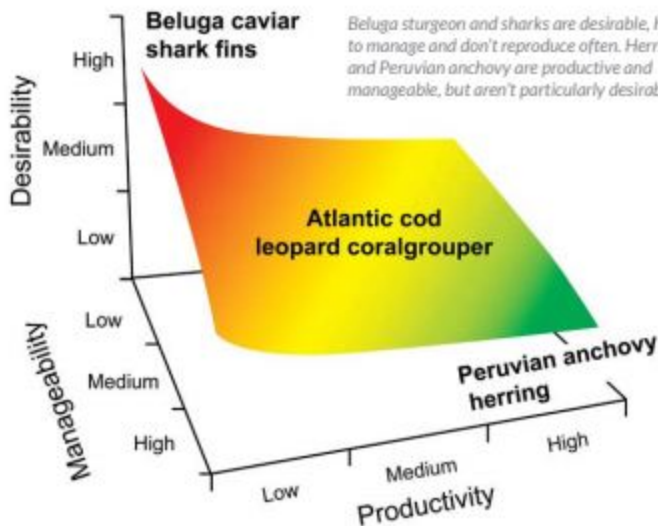
## Why we need a global ban on the shark fin trade

Shark finning should not be a contentious issue, but it is. Thus, as with all such issues, it is best to define the problem at hand. Contrary to bony fish such as herrings or perches, sharks have a rigid dorsal fin on their back, paired pectoral and pelvic fins that correspond to our arms and legs, and a tail, or caudal fin. Jointly, these fins make up about 5 percent of their live weight.

The rigidity of shark fins is provided by a bit of cartilage which, when dried, processed and cooked, turns into a chewy, noodle-like substance. Shark fins are the key ingredient in shark fin soup, a sought-after delicacy in Asian countries. Because the fin itself has no taste, the soup's flavor is supplied by chicken broth.

Shark fin soup was a rare dish in ancient times, as sharks are difficult to catch with traditional fishing methods. Thus, it was reserved for the nobility in coastal towns of China.

As the industrialization of fisheries made sharks easier to catch, shark fin soup became more affordable, but kept its standing as a prestigious dish, and spread into the interior of China and throughout the Chinese diaspora.





This then generated a near-insatiable demand for shark fins, with the number of sharks finned estimated to range between 50 and 100 million per year. This always involves their death, as fins do not grow back — as many consumers conveniently believe.

At first, this demand was met by shark bycatch in tuna and shrimp fisheries. Now, dedicated shark fin fisheries have developed, for example in the Pacific, where dolphins and sea lions are caught to then serve as bait for sharks.

Dried shark fins are extremely valuable. About half of the shark fins traded in the world go through Hong Kong for local consumption or re-export to mainland China<sup>[i]</sup>.

Sharks, in the meantime, are suffering on an individual scale, as their fins are often sliced off when they are still alive, leaving them to suffer a painful death once they are dumped overboard. Sharks are also suffering as a group, with at least 30 percent of all shark species on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.

The situation is now so bad that the Chinese government has forbidden the serving of shark fin soup at official banquets. Numerous hotels and restaurants in Hong Kong and elsewhere have removed shark fin soup from their menus, and airlines are refusing to transport shark fins.

In the United States, 12 states, notably California — home to many citizens who have their roots in China — have banned the trade of shark fins. This is in part for ethical reasons, but also because shark fin fisheries are very often pirate operations, conducted in conjunction with other illegal activities such as human and drug trafficking.

Some fisheries scientists have suggested that "sustainable" and legal shark fin fisheries should be encouraged, even though they would, at best, meet 10 percent of market demand. Moreover, as shown by the examples of ivory and caviar — which are also highly desirable and hard to manage — it is impossible to maintain the separation between luxury wildlife products that are legally "harvested" (what a term!) and those that are poached. Indeed, the authorities in Hong Kong would not be able to distinguish between shark fins from legal and sustainable fisheries from those that were pirated, even assuming that there was a motivation for such distinction.

My personal opinion is that the trade of shark fins ought to be banned everywhere. It is not worth risking the future of these essential and amazing animals in exchange for bowls of chicken soup with bits of shark inside.

*Dr. Daniel Pauly is the founder and director of the Sea Around Us project at the University of British Columbia's Institute for the Oceans and Fisheries, and is a member of the Oceana board.*

[i] Biery, L. and D. Pauly. 2012. A global review of species-specific shark-fin-to-body-mass ratios and relevant legislation. *Journal of Fish Biology* 80(5): 1643-1677.

[ii] Sadovy de Mitcheson, Y., A.A. Andersson, A. Hofford, C.S.W. Law, L.C.Y. Hau and D. Pauly. 2018. Out of control means off the menu: The case for stopping the international shark fin trade because most fins are sourced from unsustainable IUU fisheries and trade. *Marine Policy*, doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2018.08.012.