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## SHARKS JUST TIP OF CHINA CRISIS

**A** four-year investigation by the environmental group WildLifeRisk has revealed that a staggering 600 whale sharks are being processed in a single factory near Wenzhou, south-east China, every year. It's one of the largest wholesale slaughters of an internationally protected species on the planet – yet this factory is probably just one of many.

We all know that China is the world's largest consumer of endangered wildlife and that it openly flouts national and international conservation legislation. But the scale of the onslaught beggars belief.

Countless tens of millions of sharks are killed every year to feed the demand for shark-fin soup, while at least 20 million (possibly as many as 150 million) seahorses are taken from the wild every year for Traditional Chinese Medicine.

China imports as much as 70 per cent of the world's illegal ivory and is largely to blame for the soaring demand for rhino horn. It is by far the largest market for illicit tiger parts and, more recently, has been driving

pressure on declining lion populations. It still has about 100 bear-bile farms, housing more than 10,000 moon bears, and is the largest consumer of illegal timber.

Given that 250 million new Chinese middle-class consumers could enter the market for endangered wildlife products over the next decade, the outlook is undeniably bleak.

However, there are signs

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of progress. A few months ago China destroyed more than six tonnes of seized ivory; shark-fin soup has been banned from state banquets; and some websites have stopped trading in endangered wildlife. Meanwhile everyone, from the Duke of Cambridge and David Beckham to Chinese basketball player Yao Ming and film star Li Bingbing, is speaking out.

But how long can we keep endangered wildlife populations alive while we wait for attitudes to change? The clock is ticking.