



Mark Carwardine's **AT A GLANCE...**

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SHARK FINNING

WHAT IS SHARK FINNING?

It is the gruesome practice of cutting off a live shark's fins and throwing the rest of the animal back into the sea, where it dies a slow and painful death. The fins are used in China and Hong Kong, and by Chinese communities elsewhere in the world, as the key ingredient in shark-fin soup.

WHAT'S SHARK-FIN SOUP?

This glutinous broth is a traditional Chinese dish dating back more than 1,000 years. Once a rare delicacy consumed only by the Chinese aristocracy, it played an important role as an indicator of social standing. The fibres take on a consistency similar to noodles, but they have virtually no taste or nutritional value, so chicken stock or something similar is added to improve the flavour.

WHY IS IT A PROBLEM?

In the past 20 years or so, the demand for shark-fin soup has rocketed. It is still associated with privilege and social rank – a bowl of soup can cost up to US\$100 – but the explosive growth in the Chinese economy means that hundreds of millions of people can now afford this luxury. Many consider it *de rigueur* at important events such as weddings, birthdays, business banquets and during Chinese New Year celebrations. Shark-fin soup is also popular in traditional Chinese medicine (although research suggests that it contains so much mercury and other toxins it is barely fit for human

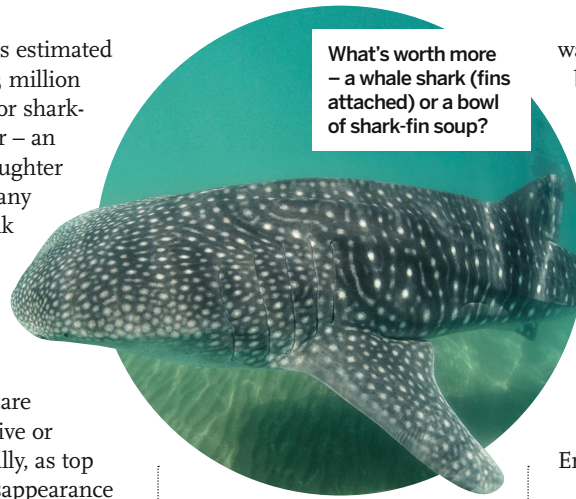
consumption). It is estimated that as many as 73 million sharks are killed for shark-fin soup every year – an indiscriminate slaughter that is pushing many species to the brink of extinction.

WHY SHOULD WE CARE?

Many people fear sharks and don't care whether they survive or not. But, ecologically, as top predators their disappearance will disrupt entire ocean ecosystems. Economically, they are worth more alive than dead – in contrast to the short-lived profits of shark finning, shark diving has become a sustainable, multi-million pound business. Scientifically, medical researchers want to learn how shark wounds heal so quickly and how they seem to be resistant to cancer. Spiritually, an ocean without sharks is unthinkable – like the Serengeti without lions.

ARE SHARKS PROTECTED?

In 1999, the UN developed the International Plan of Action for the Conservation and Management of Sharks, but no country is forced to participate and progress has been slow. Beyond that, shark legislation varies greatly between states, providing anything from zero (Hong Kong) to weak to full protection (the Bahamas). The US Shark Conservation Act 2010 requires that all sharks (except smooth dogfish) be brought ashore with their fins intact. Many people believe this is the only



What's worth more – a whale shark (fins attached) or a bowl of shark-fin soup?

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Every month he demystifies some of the most important issues affecting the world's wildlife and assesses the organisations that protect it.

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way to secure an enforceable ban on shark finning, while enabling the collection of species-specific management data. The EU approved similar legislation in 2013, and other countries are following suit. Trade in a number of shark species is banned or controlled under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES).

WHAT ELSE CAN BE DONE?

It is critical to reduce demand, by changing attitudes. There are encouraging signs that shark-fin soup consumption is declining and several dozen airlines and hotel chains have stopped serving it. In 2012, the Chinese Government banned it at official functions, though the motive was more for austerity than conservation.

WHAT NEXT?

Despite progress, shark-fin soup is still a long way from being relegated to history. Also, a new problem has arisen: fishermen are switching to shark meat and creating new appetites for a product that wasn't popular before. In many countries trade in shark meat has grown exponentially – so finning bans alone aren't enough to reduce the number of sharks being killed. A new approach is clearly needed. 🐾

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