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Disappearing Sharks

Shark fishermen at work on a remote reef in Papua New Guinea



Sharks are a rare sighting in our seas these days. Their future hangs in the balance. Our choices can make a difference to their future.

**By Orla Doherty,
Managing Director,
PCRF**

Dominions of the sea for the past 400,000 years, sharks are now being removed at an unprecedented and unsustainable rate. Soon, our future oceans could have very few left.

More than 100 million sharks are killed every year, mostly for their fins, which are used in the luxury

food item, shark's fin soup. Once a delicacy of the Chinese nobility served at banquets, today it has returned to the business lunch table, the wedding reception and the family celebration, at up to S\$130 a bowl. A kilo of shark fins can be sold for up to S\$1,200. Shark fins are even served as dim sum in the food courts of Asian shopping malls for just a few dollars. Moreover if you google "buy shark's fin", you'll get information on exporters from the Maldives, Vietnam, Chile, Cameroon, Pakistan, Taiwan and China.

This insatiable demand for shark fins has brought about depletion in some species by more than 90 percent in the last thirty years. The irony is that the fins themselves have absolutely zero flavour. They are mere textural sponges, added to a broth to soak up flavours from other ingredients.

Shark-finning is one of the most wasteful fishing industries in our seas today. Frequently, the fins are severed from a shark's body and the rest of the shark tossed back into the sea. They are sometimes used in fish and chips

or made into fertiliser, but the meat carries a fraction of the value of other types of fish. Shark cartilage has also been pushed as a treatment for cancer, although there is no proof that it works. As top predators in the sea, sharks accumulate high levels of mercury, but this has so far not deterred the demand for their fins.

Many types of shark do not reproduce until they are 25 years old. Diminishing numbers are being given the chance to reach this age and shark populations are disappearing fast. As they do so, other similar types of fish are being targeted, such as manta rays and other rays whose wingtips resemble a shark's fin.

While studying the coral reefs of Papua New Guinea, we dived at a sensational offshore reef, so crowded with reef sharks that we were nervous to enter the water. There were silvertips, grey reef sharks, blacktips and whitetips. We were entranced by the sight of so many predators – a truly 'pristine' version of the coral reef ecosystem.

We returned two years later to this reef. As we anchored, a small boat pulled alongside our ship. There were Papua New Guinea men onboard but our eyes were drawn to their cargo – 20 dead sharks, all with fins removed, some of them mere babies. They told us proudly how they had been trained by a Singaporean to set lines for sharks, remove the fins and dry them; and how an export chain had been established from this remote area of the Pacific all the way to Asia. When we went underwater, we didn't meet a single shark, but found their lifeless carcasses on the reef floor. The sharks were gone and our hearts were broken.

Save The Sharks! Raffles Marina actively supports PCRF in marine conservation. To do our part, we do not serve sharks fin on our menus. Join PCRF's cause at www.pcrf.org

Shark fins for sale at more than S\$1,300 each at Soekarno-Hatta International Airport, Jakarta



Shark fins for sale at more than S\$1,200 a kilo on the streets of Chinatown in Singapore

