

Shark finning: why the ocean's most barbaric practice continues to boom

The truth about sharks

Sharks

The recent seizure of the biggest shipment of illegal fins in Hong Kong history shows the taste for shark is still going strong

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Shark fin traders in Hong Kong. At least 50% of the world's shark fin is traded through the city-state.
Photograph: Paul Hilton/EPA

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n the narrow streets of Sai Ying Pun neighbourhood, the centre of Hong Kong's dried seafood trade, most window displays give pride of place to a particular item: shark fins. Perched on shelves, stuffed in jars and stacked in bags, shark fins are offered in all shapes and sizes. Several shops even include "shark fin" in their name.

Fins are lucrative, fetching as much as HK\$6,800 (£715) per catty (604.8g, or about 21oz), and the trade is big business. Hong Kong is the **largest shark fin importer in the world**, and responsible for about half of the global trade. The fins sold in Sai Ying Pun come from more than 100 countries and **76 different species of sharks and rays**, a third of which are endangered.

In May, customs officials made **the biggest shark fin seizure in Hong Kong history**: 26 tonnes of fins, contained in two shipping containers from Ecuador, cut from the bodies of 38,500 endangered sharks. The fins are often removed from the animals while still alive. The wounded sharks are then usually thrown back into the sea where, unable to swim, they sink and die of blood loss or are eaten by other predators. The practice is banned by **many countries and some international agreements**.



Shark fin soup on show at the Hong Kong Food Expo in 2018. Photograph: Alex Hofford/EPA

But the sale and consumption of shark fin remains legal in Hong Kong, although products from endangered sharks must be accompanied by a permit. Illegal trading is punishable by **up to 10 years** in jail and a HK\$10m fine, but prosecutions are rare.

Viewed as a delicacy and status symbol, shark fin is typically eaten shredded in a jelly-like soup at weddings and family banquets. “The shark fins themselves don’t taste of anything,” says Andrea Richey, executive director of **Hong Kong Shark Foundation**, a local NGO. “The taste comes only from the soup broth. It’s the texture of the shark fin that people like and the fact that it is a luxury item. It’s conspicuous consumption. It’s about showing wealth and status by ordering the best or most expensive item.”

Q&A

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A 2018 **survey by the foundation** found that 85% of the city’s Chinese restaurants still sell shark fin dishes. Shipments come in daily, often falsely labelled to dodge port checks. “When I saw that over 100 million sharks are being killed every year and 50% of that global trade was coming right through Hong Kong I was blown away. It’s a global problem that we’re dealing with. In

the last 50 years we've lost as much as **90% of some shark populations**," says Richey.

Seizures of illegal shipments are rising, with **Hong Kong** customs officials employing DNA identification, but critics say the government isn't doing enough to stop the practice.



Part of a shipment of dried shark fins seized this month by Hong Kong customs officials. The haul, weighing 26 tonnes, was the biggest in Hong Kong's history. Photograph: Nora Tam/SCMP/Zuma/Alamy

“It is essential that the Hong Kong government treats wildlife smuggling as a serious crime and includes it under schedule 1 of the Organized and Serious Crimes Ordinance [OSCO] to further deter transnational criminal enterprises who use Hong Kong as a major port and transportation hub for wildlife smuggling,” says Gloria Lai Pui-yin, senior conservation officer at WWF-Hong Kong.

The smuggling is as difficult to police on the streets as it is in the ports. Shop owners often don't know if their products are from endangered species.

If you ask the shop owners, a lot of them don't know what shark species they are selling
Andrea Richey

“If you ask the shop owners, a lot of them don’t know what shark species they are selling and so they don’t know if they are breaking the law,” says Richey. “That’s why we think they should stop the trade and put all sharks on the protected list. Otherwise they will just keep selling whatever fins they get.”

Fishers rely on it, too, a fact that isn’t lost on **Madison Stewart**, a conservationist working in Indonesia, the largest shark-catching nation in the world.

Stewart set up **Project Hiu** (hiu is Indonesian for shark) in 2018 to try to replace the trade by employing fishermen to help run sea activities for tourists instead.

Last year she organised 10 trips with different groups of fishermen. “It has been successful in providing an alternative source of income for some of these shark fishermen, although it’s still on a small scale at the moment,” says Stewart.



Shark fishermen in Indonesia, the largest exporter of shark fin to Hong Kong. Photograph: Paul Hilton/WildAid HK

Stewart points out that the shark fin trade exploits these people: on a recent two-week trip with five crew catching more than 50 sharks, each man earned just £53.

“No one’s ever told the story of the people who are really suffering from this trade,” she says. “I feel like the fin trade rivals the drug trade. It’s gotten itself all

around the world. It has so much money involved, so many illegal things involved, so much corruption and exploitation. And it's clear that it has quite a stronghold on the culture in Hong Kong still.”

With the media spotlight concentrated on the Covid-19 pandemic and anti-government protests in Hong Kong, the shark fin trade is getting even less publicity than usual, says Alex Hofford, an independent wildlife trade consultant.

“Awareness campaigns to reduce shark fin demand aren't getting the full exposure they deserve. I'd also venture to suggest that in some ways, the criminal networks are making hay while the sun shines,” he says.

There has been some recent progress. After a campaign of protests outside its restaurants, Maxim's, Hong Kong's largest restaurant group, agreed in January 2020 to take shark fin off its menus. Nevertheless, other restaurant groups, particularly Choi Fook Wedding Banquet Group and Palace Banquet Group – who cater exclusively to Hong Kong's wedding market – continue to sell shark fin in volume.

“It's believed these two companies are Hong Kong's largest contributor to the depletion of shark populations worldwide,” says Hofford. “And it's shark fin traders, who procure their often illegal stocks from places like Ecuador, who supply them.”

Hong Kong officials have arrested a 57-year-old man in Sai Ying Pun in connection with the recent seizure. He has been released on bail pending investigation. In the meantime, Richey says, the trade continues. “What you see being sold in the shops here is just the tip of the iceberg.

“It's a global problem,” she says. “We want people to realise that when the buying of shark fins stops, the killing of sharks all over the world stops, too.”

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