

Richmond MP Alice Wong defends decision to eat shark fin soup

BY ALAN CAMPBELL, RICHMOND NEWS OCTOBER 13, 2012



A worker cuts off a fin from the frozen carcass of a shark at a fish processing plant in Kaohsiung, southern Taiwan.

Photograph by: Pichi Chuang, Reuters

Richmond MP Alice Wong has defended her decision to pose for Chinese media while eating a bowl of the controversial shark fin soup.

At the Jade restaurant Thursday, Wong spoke to Asian media only, with no local English-speaking media invited.

While helping herself to a bowl of the much maligned shark fin soup, Wong was reacting to mounting municipal pressure from Lower Mainland cities, who're threatening to introduce a ban on shark fin products.

Reached by phone on Friday afternoon, Wong told the News that the banning of shark fin products, including the soup – considered a delicacy in Chinese culture - is a federal responsibility and is not for the cities to consider.

She said she's confident the current federal import regulations are strong enough to stop the shipment into Canada of produce that's been harvested illegally – namely, the act of finning, where poachers catch a shark, slice off its fin and dump it back in the ocean to bleed to death, thus threatening many species with extinction, according to activists.

Canada allows shark fins to be imported, as long as they've been harvested from a shark that's not endangered and is not just caught for its fin.

However, she had no idea if the soup she ate came from an endangered species and the restaurant owner, David Chung, himself admitted previously he did not know either.

"I don't know what shark he uses, I can't speak on his behalf, you would have to ask him," said Wong.

"But the source (for shark fin products) has had to be clearly indicated as early as 1999.

"And all imports are regulated and there's strong enforcement, the importer has to make sure the shark fins coming are harvested legally."

Many labels, however, on imported shark fin products do not say which species the fin came from and there's no way for the importer to know if it was actually caught legally or not.

"There are regulations and the importer has to go by the rules. The labelling is another issue," she added.

Wong also appeared to back restaurant owner Chung's position that he's not breaking any laws by serving the shark fin soup and has every right to do so.

"It's part of the culture and (the government) has no intention of banning the soup," she said.

"People have the right to eat it and also the right not to eat it, it's a choice."

Wong also said that Chinese-based airline giant Cathay Pacific's decision to ban the shipment of shark fin products from their flights is their "own business decision." The airline made the call after hearing scientific evidence that certain species of shark could be fished into extinction.

Noting that TV channel CTV were aware of the soup press conference, Wong apologized for the omission of local English-speaking media from the invites.

Her communication advisor, Robert Lynch, said a media advisory was sent out by the Vancouver office, adding that he would look into why no local English-speaking media appeared to be invited.

Kevin Huang, a spokesman for Shark Truth, a group that opposes the practice of shark finning, said his organization is still unclear as to who Wong is representing.

"Currently, we're trying to figure out whether Alice Wong is representing the Conservative government, in other words the federal government in her stand, or if she's just going on her own.

"After we're clear on that, we'll be in a better position to make a comment. Since there was no official press statement, we're only going off our sources and the Chinese media. From what I understand, only Chinese media were invited."

Chung, who is also head of the BC Asian Restaurant and Cafe Owners Association, has said in the

past that he doesn't know if the soup he serves is derived from one of the many endangered shark species. And he has refused to hand over samples of his shark fins to the Vancouver Animal Defense League for DNA testing.

The City of Vancouver is seeking a regional shark fin and giving local Chinese restaurants about a year to clear existing inventories, while Richmond, Burnaby and Surrey are all investigating a ban.

Chung has warned he'll "declare war" on any ban.

He said it's people's right to eat what they want and that any such ban is "culturally insensitive."

In his culture, serving a dish such as shark fin soup to someone is necessary to show sincerity in your gratitude, he added.

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