

Chinese-Canadians urged to give up shark-fin soup

SFU business graduate Claudia Li founded Shark Truth, which is dedicated to reversing the severe global decline in sharks

BY LARRY PYNN, VANCOUVER SUN JUNE 5, 2010

Vancouver's Claudia Li is helping to save the world's sharks, one bowl of soup at a time.

The business graduate from Simon Fraser University has founded Shark Truth, a non-profit organization dedicated to helping reverse the severe global decline in sharks due to the Asian demand for shark-fin soup.

Her own turning point occurred last year while watching Sharkwater, an award-winning documentary by Canadian filmmaker Rob Stewart that highlighted the global slaughter of sharks for their fins.

"I couldn't sleep that night," she said in an interview.

"I was appalled at how ignorant I was and I couldn't believe my own people in my community could cause the demise of a population of sharks that has existed for over 400 million years."

The International Union for Conservation of Nature reported in 2007 that 32 per cent of the world's pelagic sharks and rays are threatened, which includes six per cent that are endangered and 26 per cent that are vulnerable. A further 24 per cent are near threatened.

Li launched Shark Truth not to use attack or boycott tactics, but rather to engage the community on the issue. She started by asking Chinese couples to commit to not serving shark-fin soup at their weddings.

Thirteen couples signed on -- nine from Canada, four international -- and became eligible for a trip to Mexico, complete with a shark-diving tour.

With 300 to 400 guests at a Chinese wedding, the number of sharks saved begins to add up -- not to mention the impact not eating soup might have on those guests down the road.

"Children have a lot of power in terms of convincing their parents what to do or not to do," Li said.

At the moment there is virtually "zero awareness" of shark conservation in the Chinese community, she added.

"The unintended consequence of negative shark portrayals in the media is that it brainwashes everyone to believe they're dangerous and don't deserve to be protected.

"That's why there's so much finning and killing of sharks going on without the general public taking

notice."

Li said shark-fin soup is rooted in Cantonese cuisine. It's mainly served at wedding banquets, mulched into a larger broth, she said, but an individual serving in a finer Vancouver restaurant could cost \$100 and up, if the fin is intact in the bowl.

The fin adds consistency to the broth but not much flavour, she said.

The historic difficulty involved in killing a shark gave prestige to the item.

"It's a deep-seated thing. They used to say that if there is no shark-fin soup, the bride is marrying into a poor family."

Li's ultimate goal is a federal ban on shark-fin imports, not an easy task in the murky international politics of wildlife trade.

Ernie Cooper, a wildlife trade specialist with the World Wildlife Fund in Vancouver, noted that three shark species are listed under Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), meaning they require export permits assuring that their trade is not detrimental to the species.

The basking shark and whale shark are killed mainly for their fins and meat, and the great white shark for its jaws and teeth, he said.

At the CITES convention in Qatar last March, pro-fishing delegates led by nations such as Japan narrowly defeated U.S. motions to also list hammerhead and oceanic white-tip sharks, he noted.

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