

The dangerous allure of shark-fin soup and the grassroots movement to combat it

BY LARRY PYNN, VANCOUVER SUN OCTOBER 25, 2010



SFU business graduate Claudia Li, the founder of Shark Truth, is campaigning against shark-fin soup.

Photograph by: Gerry Kahrman, Vancouver Sun, Vancouver Sun

Tai Cheng's father Derick, a prominent Chinatown businessman, was okay with not serving shark-fin soup at his son's wedding.

But Cheng's mother, Roxy, had her doubts.

Shark-fin soup is traditional at such banquets. Failure to serve it could send the wrong message to the 680 guests assembling at the Floata Seafood Restaurant on Keefer Street.

"She was worried about the backlash, the stigma, the talk in the community," Cheng explained.

As it turns out, nobody complained and everyone was forced to take a fresh look at the ecological impact of their culture -- in this case, the global decline in shark populations.

"There is no purpose other than the fact it's a sign of wealth," said Cheng's bride, Julianna Paik, who's of Korean descent. "Ask yourselves why you're choosing to serve it. Understand all aspects of that dinner and make a conscious choice, not just because of tradition or to show that your family is wealthy."

Not far away, restaurant manager Daniel Chow sat down with The Vancouver Sun as the midweek luncheon crowd eased.

"In my opinion, it's about time to stop it," he said of the global slaughter of sharks. "Sharks are the top of the food chain. Once no shark, the ocean will lose the balance."

His boss is sympathetic, but not quite as committed. He doesn't want the restaurant's name published in the paper.

Chow understands the desire to meet the demands of customers.

Shark-fin soup is also a lucrative item that restaurants cannot easily dismiss.

"It's the meaning of high class," he explained. "The ancient Chinese people, they used to do it. They'd like to eat something that's hard to get. Like shark fin -- they have to get the shark to get out the fin. Once they're used to it, 'Oh, I'm rich, I can afford to eat something expensive.'"

The long-standing view at wedding banquets: "If you don't serve shark fin, that means no respect."

Sharks in decline

Yet the impact is enormous. Shark populations are in free fall around the globe, with as many as 73 million thought to be traded annually for their fins, and Canada's Asian communities are contributing to the conservation crisis.

Scientists warn that the removal of a top predator will have serious ecological consequences, and they appreciate grassroots efforts within the Chinese community to make a difference.

"We have to stop that," asserted Dennis Thoney, director of animal operations for the Vancouver Aquarium. "We need to educate Asians about shark-fin soup. The fishery just cannot handle that."

Chow's restaurant charges \$25 for an individual bowl, although one can pay many times that, depending on the quality and the size of the fin. Herbal shops in Chinatown can charge more than \$600 a pound for better fins.

During cooking, shark fin becomes long and transparent, like vermicelli. "It doesn't have any taste," Chow said, noting the soup base is the "soul of the soup" with ingredients such as pork, chicken bones and ham (for the salt).

Larger and thicker fins fetch the highest price, especially the dorsal fin on the back of the shark.

"It's getting more popular," Chow said. "Chinese society is getting rich, so many occasions."

The demand led the Green Party of Canada, in 2007, to call for a ban on the import of shark fins. Shark Truth, an organization founded by Simon Fraser University business graduate Claudia Li, supports that ban in hopes of putting an end to shark-fin soup.

Nick Dulvy, co-chair of the shark specialist group for the International Union for Conservation, supports efforts within the Asian community to educate consumers about the impact of their actions.

"That's the way forward," he said. "There is a sense that people in the Chinese community want the opportunity to do something about the consumption of shark-fin soup."

Chow said he asks, but does not push, customers to consider an alternative to shark-fin soup when planning a wedding banquet.

"It's a first step," he said. "If they're open to the idea, I'll suggest something else."

Options include other expensive soups, perhaps one with rare mushrooms or another type of seafood, such as fish maw (swim bladder). "Find a substitute to shark fin ... otherwise it won't be stopped."

Some young Asian couples are taking a position on their own against shark-fin soup at their weddings.

"I feel proud when they do that," Chow said. "But it's still small. You'll have to wait for a certain long time to change peoples' minds."

Lack of action

International government action to save sharks has proven largely futile.

Even the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) achieves limited success.

"The problem with CITES is that countries that have an enormous vested interest in the economics of fisheries hold sway," Dulvy said.

"It comes down to who has the most influence and power and carry the most votes on the day. At the moment, while many countries are concerned about pelagic sharks, the reality is that the bulk of countries are not voting to list sharks under CITES."

A study published online recently in Progress in Oceanography by Peter Jacques of the University of Central Florida, found that globally active shark management is "nearly nonexistent," while pressures on sharks, through practices such as finning, have increased over the past 20 years.

Jacques noted that "there are blocs of countries working actively against shark listings in CITES, and intense financial interests for fins at stake in legal and illegal markets, where organized crime syndicates have infiltrated the industry, complicating the geopolitical possibility of effective conservation."

Dulvy, who also is Canada research chair in marine biodiversity and conservation at SFU, said oceanic sharks are often caught as "collateral" damage of our desire to eat bluefin tuna and swordfish.

"Instead of keeping the shark, they cut off the fins and throw the live shark back overboard. The business that runs the fishing fleet is making money from tuna and swordfish, but the fishermen on the boats are supplementing their salary by keeping these fins. They're making a bit of money on the side ... trying to make a living like you or me."

More countries are banning the inhumane and wasteful practice of finning and requiring fishermen to at least bring the whole shark back to the dock; that way, officials have a better idea of the species and numbers being impacted.

Ernie Cooper has closely followed the international trade in wildlife for more than 20 years as Canada's first wildlife inspector with Environment Canada, and now as a wildlife trafficking specialist with the World Wildlife Fund.

At the latest CITES meeting in March 2010 in Qatar, the U.S. sought to list hammerhead and oceanic white-tip sharks under Appendix II, which would require export permits and the assurance of government that the trade is not detrimental to the species.

But international politics combined with poor attendance due to the high costs of visiting the Gulf state conspired against the interests of conservation, Cooper said.

Japan did its homework and lined up enough opposition to defeat a more contentious proposal that would have banned the commercial trade in Atlantic bluefin tuna, a species highly valued for sushi but in decline.

"That was the real battle," Cooper said. "Japan, as the primary market, pulled out all the stops to ensure the bluefin tuna proposal didn't pass."

Libya called for a vote early in the discussion -- which every country has the right to do -- and limited discussion on the merits of the proposal. "It's politics. Let's just say Libya did what it was supposed to do."

The vote: 72 out of 129 CITES members voted against the trade ban, 43 voted in favour, 14 abstained. A two-thirds majority is needed to pass under CITES rules. CITES has 175 member countries.

Once the bluefin tuna listing was defeated, the sharks fell as well. Proposals by the European Union to list the spiny dogfish and porbeagle shark also failed, with Canada opposing listing of the dogfish but supporting porbeagle.

To date only three shark species have been listed under CITES Appendix II: the basking shark and whale shark are killed mainly for their fins and meat, and the great white shark for its jaws and teeth.

Even so, the giant retail website, eBay, brazenly lists great white shark teeth for sale, mostly from China, but also the U.S.

"When it comes to the wildlife trade, it's always about the money," confirmed Cooper, describing

Vancouver as a "major entry point" for Asian wildlife products entering Canada.

The awe of wild sharks

As for newlyweds Paik and Cheng, both Vancouver lawyers, their conservation journey only began at their wedding.

By committing not to serve shark-fin soup, they entered and won a Shark Truth contest that took them to Mexico's Mayan Riviera near Cancun last August. There, they snorkelled with whale sharks - the largest fish in the ocean, at well over 10 metres -- that had gathered to feed on plankton.

"It was overwhelming," Paik said. "You see them coming up through the darkness with their mouth open. They're scary looking because of the image we have of Jaws, but they're harmless, very gentle, and so beautiful."

Cheng was unfazed by the fact the sharks were big enough to swallow him.

"It was very calming to be in the water with them. They were just minding their own business."

lpynn@vancouver.sun.com

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Shark Week: A series

Saturday

What's behind the worldwide decline in shark populations.

Today

The demand, and controversy, around shark fin soup.

Tuesday

Recovery efforts for the basking shark, all but wiped out in B.C.

Wednesday

The status of sixgills and the promise of ecotourism.

Thursday

The lowly dogfish and plans for a sustainable shark fishery.

Friday

One Vancouver man's efforts to help save sharks.



Tai Cheng (left) and Julianna Paik did not serve the traditional shark-fin soup at their wedding.

Photograph by: Ian Lindsay, Vancouver Sun, Vancouver Sun

