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When shark activists bite back

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Claudia Li is tired of people pulling the “race card” to defend the consumption of shark’s fin.

Persuading Chinese people to stop eating shark’s fin is an ecological issue, not a racial or cultural one, says Ms. Li, founder of the Vancouver volunteer group Shark Truth.

Every year, an estimated 73 million sharks are killed to supply Chinese consumers with the prized delicacy, and conservation groups say one-third of the world’s shark species are now threatened with extinction. According to the United Nations Environment Program, the shark populations have plunged by 90 per cent in the Gulf of Mexico and the Mediterranean Sea and by 75 per cent in the northwestern Atlantic Ocean within 15 years. Seven shark species – the great white, basking, whale, porbeagle, spiny dogfish, and shortfin and longfin mako sharks – are protected under a [UN agreement](#).

Besides hurting shark stocks, the finning industry is notorious for the cruel and wasteful practice of slicing fins off live fish, leaving them to die slowly.

Yet Ms. Li understands why many Chinese Canadians, particularly those in the older generations, tend to dismiss anti-shark-finning efforts as an attack on their culture. “I think a lot of people hear, ... ‘Chinese people are disgusting and why do they do this disgusting thing?’ “ she says. “So a lot of people automatically put up this wall.”

In recent weeks, a proposal to ban the sale and possession of shark’s fin in California has ignited opponents, who consider such legislation discriminatory or, in the very least, hypocritical.

California Senator Leland Yee told The New York Times that the consumption of shark-fin soup has been a part of Chinese culture for thousands of years, and he argued that an alternative should be sought to balance protecting the environment and preserving tradition.

Salon writer Francis Lam suggested that the proposed ban smacks of political posturing, a way of “scoring cheap environmental points” without losing “votes that matter.” He argued that it would be much more difficult to win public favour by banning endangered tuna or tackling the ecological problems associated with factory farming.

Enter the anti-shark-finning cause’s most powerful weapon: activists of Chinese descent.

Ms. Li says that when the message comes from her, and from Shark Truth's Chinese-Canadian volunteers, many people find it easier to stomach. Being able to broach the issue from the same cultural perspective and speaking the same languages, activists of Chinese backgrounds are arguably the most effective messengers to change the attitudes of their fellow Chinese consumers.

Peter Knights, executive director of the San Francisco-based conservation group WildAid, says the participation of high-profile Chinese celebrities, most notably basketball star Yao Ming, has been essential to his organization's international efforts. In recent years, Mr. Yao has appeared on billboards, in commercials and on transit advertisements across Beijing and Shanghai and even in a smaller campaign in Canada, acting as WildAid's anti-shark-finning ambassador.

"When you're trying to persuade people to change their behaviour, voices that people can most identify with are the most powerful," Mr. Knights says.

At Humane Society International, based in Washington, D.C., wildlife campaign manager Iris Ho acknowledges that she has an easier time reaching out to Chinese restaurateurs and consumers because of a common language and ethnicity.

"I've heard people who are non-Chinese or non-Asian, when they go to restaurants telling them not to serve shark-fin soup, they usually get yelled at," she says. "I have not been yelled at so far."

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