

Save-shark campaign cooks on persuasion

BY JUDITH LAVOIE, TIMES COLONIST MAY 15, 2011

The graphic photo of a bloody shark fin, probably cut from a fish that was then tossed overboard to die, was a sharp contrast to the sketch of Harry the Shark on Claudia Li's red T-shirt.

But both had the same aim -to save many of the world's shark species from the risk of extinction.

"Sharks are threatened in almost all the ice-free waters of the world," said Nicholas Dulvy, Simon Fraser University Canada research chairman in marine biodiversity and conservation.

Some of the 38 million sharks killed each year are bycatch and others are caught deliberately -and often unreported -because of the value of fins, which are made into shark's fin soup, a symbol of prosperity at Chinese weddings, Dulvy said at the International Marine Conservation Congress in Victoria on Saturday.

"Often the fins are removed and the carcasses thrown back in the sea. But they are not carcasses, they are alive. It's inhumane and wasteful when we are facing a protein crisis. This is not the time to be wasteful of fish."

While Dulvy was looking at the world picture of the problems resulting from shark finning and advocating for bans on shark fishing, Li was taking direct action.

Li, an SFU graduate business student of Chinese heritage, started Shark Truth with the campaign Stop The Soup. It tries to convince Chinese couples not to serve soup at their weddings.

Using Harry the Shark as her mascot, with the slogan "Save Harry's Fins," Li first appealed to the fashion element with a poster describing why shark fin soup is "so 1980s," and then launched a competition for couples who chose not to serve soup.

During the first year, Li obtained 38 pledges from couples, which meant 4,300 bowls of soup were not served at Chinese weddings in Vancouver. The spin-off was that between 200 and 400 sharks were saved, Dulvy said.

"It's a drop in the ocean, you might think," he said.

But some populations of sharks are down to mere hundreds, so it is possible Li has saved an entire population of sharks, said Dulvy, who started pondering how his students could take direct action.

"I said 'go out and do one thing to save the world,' " Dulvy said.

"It's the Facebook generation, so I asked them to leverage the power of the crowd and demonstrate they had made a difference in less than 12 weeks."

One group of students removed four tonnes of ivy from Vancouver parks, another raised money for a

North Shore stream cleanup through a nightclub gettogether.

"Then I received a documents saying I had adopted three orangutans," Dulvy said.

"Biodiversity loss is a global problem, but it's a compilation of millions of actions and we can change those negative actions into positive actions."

Li said in an interview that, helped by a grant from the Vancouver Foundation, she is again organizing an international competition for engaged couples who are willing to take the pledge to avoid shark's fin soup.

"I'm trying to get 38 couples and the grand prize is a trip to Hawaii to cage-dive with sharks because, last year, [Hawaii] passed a bill to ban shark fin consumption," she said.

A soup cooking contest, looking at alternatives to shark's fins, is also in the works.

For more information, go to sharktruth.com or jlavoie@timescolonist.com

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