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Activists protest to ban shark fins in China Town

BY MEDHA, VANCOUVER SUN JULY 9, 2011

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Environmentalist Anthony Marr (right) launches a campaign at the Beijing Trading Co. Ltd to ban shark fins.

Photograph by: Nick Procylo, Vancouver Sun

A group of local community organizations and activists came together in China Town Saturday morning in support of a ban on shark fins.

Shark fin soup has been served as a delicacy for centuries in China and elsewhere and is a huge status symbol often served at wedding banquets.

The demand has been so huge, that it has led to the virtual decimation of the species. Shark populations worldwide have been in decline and as many as 73 million are thought to be traded annually for their fins triggering a conservation crisis.

"The removal of the top predator from the oceans is bound to have serious consequences," said Anthony Marr, a Chinese Canadian animal rights activist who is campaigning for the ban. He has previously been involved with campaigns leading to the ban of products containing tiger bone, bear bile and rhino horns.

Claudia Li, the founder of Shark Truth, an organization that has been involved in grassroots efforts to stop shark fin use within the Chinese-Canadian community said that she supported the idea of ban, but felt that cultural sensitivity was needed in addressing the issue. "Most vendors dealing in shark fins here in China Town are low and middle income operators," she said, "we need to work at making the community aware rather than antagonizing them. That only burns bridges."

Shark Tooth has been involved in an innovative project that asks young couples to publicly pledge that they will not serve shark fin soup at their wedding banquet and offers them a chance to win a honeymoon trip.

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The project said Li has been hugely successful, "It has been a slow process but the younger generation is embracing the change — now it has become rather unstylish to serve the shark fin soup at weddings."

Yvonna Tsang, the owner of Beijing Trading Company, a shop that still stocks the delicacy said that she has seen demand go down in the past few years and is herself considering not to stock the product any longer.

The younger generation is far more aware she said, admitting that she herself wasn't aware of the harm caused by the practice until she saw the documentary Sharkwater on television.

Bans help, but working at a grassroots level is the best way forward, said Mike McDermid, of Ocean Wise, a Vancouver Aquarium conservation initiative over a phone interview, "as demand goes down, so does the incentive for stocking and trading in the product."

Recently, Brantford, Ontario became the first municipality in Canada to ban shark fins.

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