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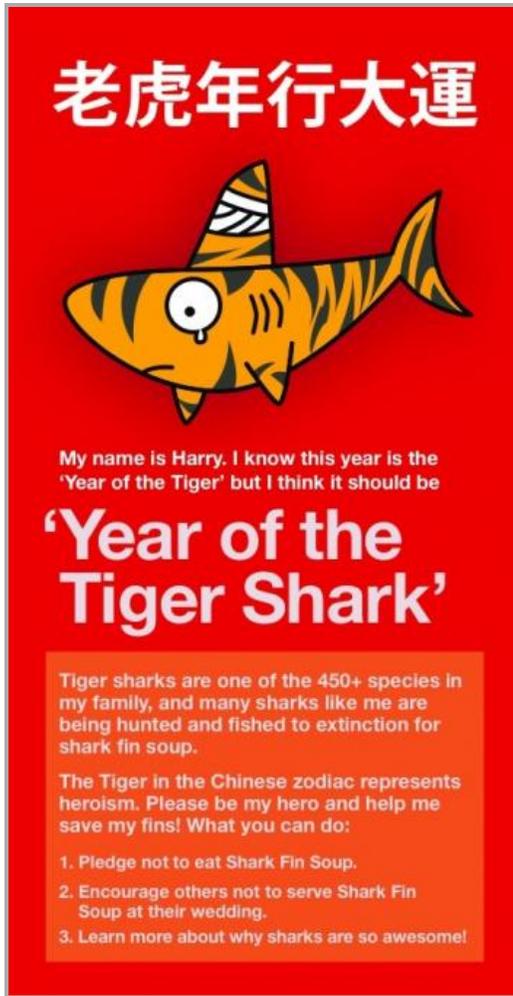
Community

Global

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## Shark Truth: Stopping the Soup

By Claudia Li



Shark Truth and Wake Project

Shark Truth distributed this flyer at Vancouver's Chinese New Year Parade for the Year of the Tiger on February 14, 2010.

"So, Claud, you say you care about sustainability, right? Do you drink shark fin soup?" she asked. Recalling attacks on Chinese practices from other Westerners, I shrugged and responded defensively, "Yeah, it's a part of my people's culture. Why?"

She told me her topic was inspired by *Sharkwater*, a film that debunks the myths around shark attacks and links the species' rapid demise to the consumption of shark fin soup.

I had never heard of it. I had never even questioned how shark fin got in my bowl.

"You've got to watch this movie. It'll blow your mind." I didn't appreciate her challenging my cultural traditions, nor was I much of a movie buff. Still, I took a chance and decided to watch the film one night.

Shark fin soup is the "food of the wealthy," elders used to say. I first encountered the dish when I was young, accompanying my mom on one of her business dinners at an upscale Chinese restaurant. I remember her dressing me up for what I was told would be a "special dinner." The chairs in the restaurant were cushioned and embroidered—I was so small my feet couldn't reach the floor. She told me I was going to be eating something very special and expensive. It turned out to be shark fin soup. When I tried it, it just seemed like thickened chicken broth in a fancy bowl. The fins provided no flavor, but lots of status.

After a few of these banquets, my elders explained to me why we drank it. They said shark fin was revered for its alleged health benefits. Shark cartilage supposedly strengthens the immune system and its collagen is said to soften skin. Most notably, however, shark fin soup is highly esteemed because it is only served at important banquet dinners. It is a Chinese symbol of "face," or dignity and prestige. About 38 million sharks are killed each year for their fins.

Even then, I was skeptical of the health claims, but I followed the tradition out of respect for my elders and my Chinese heritage. I grew up in a traditional household and my community was built on a web of tight-knit relationships. In my mind, it was my responsibility to live up to their expectations – and I was proud to do so.

Fast-forward fifteen years. By now, I had eaten fifty or so bowls of shark fin soup on special occasions, most of which were weddings. I was a business student at Simon Fraser University, touting recycling and hybrid cars as solutions to the climate crisis.

Before graduating, I followed a whim and entered an honors course on sustainability. The instructor asked us to write an essay analyzing a social or environmental phenomenon. My classmate chose to look at the negative portrayal of sharks in the media.

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When it was over, I couldn't sleep. I was stunned by my own ignorance about sharks. I hadn't known about the integral role they play as a top predator in the oceans, or about their stabilizing effect on the earth's largest ecosystem. I hadn't known about the cruelty and wastefulness of the shark fin industry. Furthermore, I only then learned that mercury contamination rendered shark fin a food that was more harmful than beneficial to our health.

I was disgusted with myself for enjoying shark fin soup only weeks earlier at a cousin's banquet. Beyond that, I was unsettled because I realized my culture was driving these majestic and misunderstood animals toward extinction, all for soup. I realized that if we want to save face for our people, we must take responsibility and stop the consumption of shark fin soup while we still can. It's up to us to take a stand because the shark fin issue relies, almost exclusively, on the actions of the Chinese people.

After watching *Sharkwater*, I began to talk to my family and Chinese friends about the irreversible consequences of shark fin soup. I hoped to make at least a dent in what was happening. I begged them to make a personal commitment to stop drinking it, especially at wedding banquets. According to Chinese custom, the groom's side of the family pays for the banquet—the soup is an indicator of wealth and status. Our elders used to say "a bride who marries into a family without shark fin soup on the wedding table marries into a poor family." If the family can afford it, the guests expect shark fin soup.

I started having conversations with restaurants to no avail: they simply would not remove a popular and highly profitable item from their menus. So I decided to talk to individuals, my friends and family. They reacted to these conversations with apprehension and defensiveness—just as I had, at first. But even when I won them over on the ecological repercussions and the cruel nature of the shark fin industry, they would often say: "I never order shark fin on my own. I only have it at banquets, mostly weddings. So, what if the bowl is already in front of me? Wouldn't it be worse and even more disrespectful to let it go to waste?"

The only consumer choice at a wedding banquet is that of the hosts: the wedding couple. This is the target market where grassroots change can be catalyzed. This is where Shark Truth found its niche.

Vancouver has a large Chinese population and is home to the second largest Chinese restaurant industry in North America. It is an ideal place to create change. So, a few of my friends and I founded Shark Truth. Our mission is to Stop the Soup by engaging Chinese communities in a collaborative discussion about shark fin soup. We are starting with Chinese wedding banquets.

Currently, Shark Truth is a volunteer-based organization of 10 dedicated members. Shark Truth's effectiveness comes largely from our human resources policy: because shark fin soup is primarily demanded by Chinese consumers, we require that at least 50 percent of our volunteer team be of Chinese origin. We take a collaborative, culturally informed approach to the Chinese community, and the community, in turn, has responded positively to our campaigns. We look forward to expanding our efforts to other diasporic Chinese communities in Canada and beyond.

We run campaigns and initiatives to educate people about the problems with shark fin soup and to encourage them to stop consuming it. Last year, we launched the Happy Hearts Love Sharks wedding contest, where we asked couples to pledge to Stop the Soup. On our Facebook page, entrants submitted photos or videos of themselves along with blurbs on their stance against shark fin soup. Visitors to the site then voted for their favorite couple. With the support of the Save Our Seas Foundation and other generous sponsors, we were able to give the winning couple plane tickets to Mexico where they could swim with whale sharks. We rewarded runner-up couples with gifts, including an underwater camera, a professional wedding photo shoot, and an Adopt-a-Shark package.

We received entries from 16 couples around the globe. It's a small start, but Chinese weddings can be big—the winning couple had 680 guests—and the pledges diverted more than 3,600 bowls of shark fin soup from consumption. The success of the contest this year has encouraged us to make it an



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annual event.

The Happy Hearts Love Sharks wedding contest is just one component of our wedding campaign, which aims to empower couples to Stop the Soup at their wedding banquets and to educate

their guests on the shark fin issue. In addition, we are developing partnerships with Chinese wedding photographers to organize educational seminars for marrying couples. These seminars will provide a community of support to couples who may face strong resistance to giving up shark fin soup from influential elders in their families.

Beyond the wedding campaign, Shark Truth engages Vancouver's Chinese community by participating in local events. This year, we launched the Hug-a-Shark event at the Chinese New Year's Parade in Chinatown to debunk myths about shark attacks. We also participated in the Dragon Boat Festival and other cultural events around Vancouver.

Like others, I used to argue that the removal of shark fin soup from Chinese cuisine would mean the loss of an important part of Chinese heritage. But I consider myself no less Chinese now that I've stopped drinking the soup. If anything, taking shark fin off the menu can help preserve Chinese culture and communities by helping our oceans to thrive.

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*Shark Truth*

The display at Tai Cheng and Julianna Paik's wedding banquet at Floata restaurant in Vancouver, where guests went without shark fin soup.

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