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Vancouver campaigner raises cultural hackles in call for ban of shark fin sales

BY CHERYL CHAN, THE PROVINCE JULY 11, 2011

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Environmentalist Anthony Marr launches a campaign at the Beijing Trading Co. Ltd to ban shark fins in Vancouver, BC., on July 9, 2011. Talking with Yvonna Tsang.

Photograph by: Nick Procylo, PNG

On a sunny Saturday morning, Anthony Marr walks into Beijing Trading Company herbal store on Pender Street in Vancouver's Chinatown and asks the shopkeeper in Cantonese about her shark fin.

"Do you know where it's from?"

"Will you lose money if it's banned tomorrow?"

"As a Chinese person, do you think we should stop?"

Marr, a Vancouver-based Chinese-Canadian activist, is calling for a ban on the sale and consumption of shark fin, and today he is taking the media on a tour of businesses still selling it.

Shopkeeper Yvonna Tsang looks taken aback, but answers Marr's questions.

"People are buying less. Not so many use it for banquets now," she says, motioning to the store's last remaining jar of shark fin on the shelf behind her. She said once that stock is sold out, she will stop selling the product.

"Our Chinese culture understand and wants to protect the sharks."

The issue raises ethical concerns as well as some cultural hackles.

Shark fin, a traditional Chinese delicacy dating back centuries, is usually served in soup. The prized fin itself is rather bland, with a stringy, gelatinous texture, but the dish is considered one

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of the "big four" — along with abalone, fish maw and sea cucumbers — often served at weddings and important celebrations.

Most fins are harvested from sharks in the open ocean, where they are unprotected by bans.

Shark-finning, which involves slicing off the fins and throwing the maimed creatures back into the water, leaving them to starve or bleed to death, has long drawn the ire of animal rights activists.

An estimated 35 to 73 million sharks are killed off every year, pushing the world's battered oceans to a "point of no return," said Marr.

Simon Fraser University professor Nick Dulvy, co-chair of the International Union for Conservation of Nature's shark specialist group, says that out of 21 shark species commonly captured by commercial fisheries, half are threatened.

"There are a lot of sharks being killed and it's driving them towards extinction," he said.

Poaching is also prevalent, adds Marr, and because merchants have no easy way to identify what species a particular fin is from, a blanket ban on all fins should be imposed.

According to the United Nations Environment Program, shark populations in the Gulf of Mexico and the Mediterranean Sea have collapsed by 90 per cent over the last 15 years. Some scientists predict the extinction of sharks in less than two decades.

Demand for shark fin has risen as Chinese people become increasingly affluent. About half of the world's shark fin harvest is consumed in mainland China.

Overfishing of other species such as tuna also forces fishermen to focus the hunt on the marine predators.

In Canada, where the practice of shark finning is illegal (but not shark hunting), shark product imports have remained steady. In 2009, Canada imported 311,600 kilograms of shark products, including 77,000 kilograms of frozen or dried shark fin.

For many Chinese people who have struggled out of poverty, shark fin soup — which goes for between \$10 and \$60 a serving — is considered a status symbol, showcasing success and fortune.

Marr, who has eaten shark fin before, said he doesn't dislike the taste, but that it doesn't justify the carnage being wreaked in our oceans.

"The people either don't know or they don't care. Usually it's both."

When Judy Lao told her father she didn't want shark fin soup served at her wedding reception at the Floata Restaurant in Vancouver's Chinatown on Sunday, he was horrified.

"It was important to him," says Lao, 28. "He said it doesn't look good, because shark fin is a traditional wedding dish. It's a sign of wealth."

Like many younger Chinese-Canadians, Lao and her fiancée, Jason Shim, are aware of the cruelty of shark finning and don't attach the same cachet to the soup as their parents or grandparents.

"We don't really care, our friends don't care and shark fin has no nutritional value anyway, so why should we serve it?"

Lao eventually won her dad over. He has since been bragging to his friends about his daughter's stance, which won the couple a trip to Hawaii as part of a contest sponsored by Vancouver-based grassroots organization Shark Truth.

Founder Claudia Li, 24, became a shark champion after watching the documentary Sharkwater by Toronto native Rob Stewart and finding out where her soup came from.

"I was angry at myself for being so ignorant," she says. "I had no idea how bad it was."

Li says shark finning is an extremely wasteful practice that goes against the Chinese virtue of frugality.

Her group aims to end the consumption of shark fin, "one bowl at a time," whether through awareness or legislation, in five to 10 years.

By asking young Chinese-Canadian couples to pledge to give up shark fin soup at their



wedding banquet, Li estimates they have diverted 8,600 bowls — or 860 sharks — from consumption. This fall, she also plans to hold an Iron Chef-style cooking contest aimed at encouraging chefs to come up with an alternative to shark fin soup.

Li says it's been a struggle to get restaurateurs on board.

In Vancouver, only Ken's Chinese Restaurant on Kingsway has lent its support to Shark Truth's campaign. Most, if not all, Cantonese-style restaurants in Vancouver still serve the dish.

"They say, 'We get it, and we don't want to serve it, but if we don't, our competitors will and we'll lose a lot of business,'" explains Li.

At Vancouver's upscale Kirin Restaurant, manager Andrew Yee said the restaurant now offers banquet menus without shark fin soup because more and more customers are turning down the dish.

But it's still available on other banquet menus and on the à la carte menu. He estimates he receives about five orders a day.

"The old people prefer shark fin," he says. "But this new generation, they don't like it. They only want to please the old people, to make them happy."

But the tide is turning.

In China itself, a lawmaker has proposed a ban on the shark-fin trade.

In the U.S., Hawaii, Washington and Oregon have already imposed bans on shark fin.

Last month, Brantford, Ont. banned the possession, sale and consumption of shark fin — the first Canadian municipality to outlaw it.

And in Toronto, councillor Glenn De Baeremaeker says his motion to ban shark fin was met with overwhelming support, even among Chinese-Canadians. He is confident the motion will pass and sees no reason why a ban would not work in Vancouver.

"I've always thought of Vancouver as a more ecologically-minded city, more in touch with its oceans and mountains," he says.

Some critics say it would be better to work toward sustainability of shark populations.

Dulvy says a ban would centre the debate on loss of freedom and cultural rights.

"The community will feel like their freedoms are being removed," he points out, noting shark fin is to Chinese culture what turkey is to Thanksgiving. "It can offend them pretty deeply."

In California, the issue has divided the Chinese-Canadian community, with senator Leland Yee calling the ban an "unfair attack on Asian culture and cuisine."

Vancouver councillor Kerry Jang, who has been watching efforts in other cities, says a shark-fin ban would be controversial, hard to enforce, and might drive the trade underground.

"I'm not seeing [a ban] as having a real impact," he says. "In fact, it causes a lot of animosity and it's not as constructive as educating people and promoting an alternative."

Back in Chinatown, Bobo Chu of Cheung Sing Herbal on Main Street, where several jars of shark fin were on display, is neither for or against a ban.

"It's up to the customer and the government," she says through a translator.

A ban, however, should encompass more than just Vancouver, she says.

"If Richmond can sell the shark fin, they'll have more business."

Mar, who describes himself as a Chinese David taking on a Chinese Goliath, says it'll be no loss to Chinese culture to lose the fin.

"People just buy it because it's a status symbol. They don't even like it that much."

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