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Tide is turning in shark debate

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Dear guest

We are replacing the traditional shark fin soup in a Chinese banquet with a lobster bisque. **We are boycotting shark fin soup** because sharkfinning is a cruel practice and its effects are destroying the environment.

Sharkfinning involves the removal and retention of shark fins. Since only the fins are considered valuable, the rest of the shark is tossed back into the ocean. The shark is still alive and, unable to swim, it sinks to the bottom where it is eaten alive by other fish.

Sharkfinning is not only cruel, but it is also unsustainable and pushing sharks to the brink of extinction. The loss and devastation of shark populations threaten the stability of marine ecosystems and fisheries around the world.

On your behalf, we are donating to WildAid to join the fight against sharkfinning. Please help us and **say no to shark fin soup**. For more information, go to www.sharkwater.com

Jay & Jo

A card explains to wedding guests why shark fin soup will not be served.

SUPPLIED PHOTO

Robyn Doolittle
Urban Affairs Reporter

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This simple but controversial message greeted each of Joanna Hui and Jason Kwok's 250 wedding guests last summer.

A copy had been placed atop every dinner plate in the banquet hall.

"We didn't want to hide the fact that we weren't having shark fin soup. We were being up front about it. The cards explained everything," said Hui, 32.

Across North America, cities and states are passing legislation to stop the sale of shark fin soup. It started in Hawaii, Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands. Washington State recently enacted a law. Legislation is pending in Oregon and California. And in the last few months, municipalities across Canada are taking up the cause.

It all began with former Brantford MPP Phil Gillies, a Canadian representative with the environmental advocacy group WildAid. Gillies went around the country, speaking with provincial and municipal leaders about moving on legislation.

"What we heard was: we know it's a good thing to do. But we don't necessarily want to be the first. So I took it to my hometown of Brantford. It passed. And from there, everything has kind of exploded," he said.

In May, Brantford became the first Canadian municipality to outlaw the dish. Oakville council voted earlier this week to end its sale. Mississauga and Toronto are also eyeing a ban.

Gillies said he has recently received calls from Hamilton and Burlington. Petitions are circulating in Sudbury and Calgary. And his office is in talks with political leaders in British Columbia.

"But the real phenomenon in various parts of the country is Chinese Canadian couples getting engaged and announcing that they will not be serving shark fin soup," he said.

Two years ago, activist Claudia Li launched a wedding contest through her Vancouver-based not-for-profit organization, Shark Truth.

Couples who pledged to shirk tradition and forgo shark fin soup would be entered to win a dream vacation. Last year's winning couple spent a week diving with whale sharks in Mexico. This year, the couple will be sent to Hawaii. About 40 couples have made the pledge so far, said Li, including four from the Toronto area.

This brings us back to Hui and Kwok.

Like many young Chinese Canadians, they grew up eating shark fin at special occasions but changed their minds after watching the documentary *Sharkwater*.

Written and directed by Toronto resident Rob Stewart, the film exposed the brutal practices associated with shark hunting.

Each year, more than 70 million sharks are killed, almost exclusively for their fins. At this rate, experts predict numerous species of the deep sea predator could be extinct in just over a decade.

Shark hunting in such great numbers is a relatively new phenomenon, said Stewart. It took off in the 1980s because of a growing Chinese middle class and a shift to longline fishing.

The idea was that compared to dragging nets, longline would reduce the number of accidental catches.

"They ended up catching lots of sharks. It was a fast way for anyone looking to make a quick buck," said Stewart.

Fisherman with small boats could make a financial killing. There was no need to store thousands of fish. Tiny and lightweight shark fins — harvested from the top, sides and tail — sell for \$600 to \$700 per kilo. The mutilated fish is then discarded, often still alive, back into the ocean to drown or be eaten.

At first, attempts were made to outlaw the definning. Canada was one of the first to do this in 1994. Today, more than 95 countries have laws against the practice.



Making News



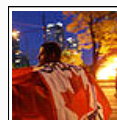
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But activists found that since numerous shark-rich countries didn't have bans and laws can't be enforced in international waters, they needed to go after the demand.

"In other words, to stop the sale of the product at the consumer level," said Gillies.

This involves lobbying for restrictions on the sale and changing attitudes. This is why stories such as Hui and Kwok's are so inspiring for people like Li, Gillies and Stewart.

When it came time to tell their parents, Hui and Kwok found their families to be very supportive. It was the caterer who fought back.

What turkey is to Western Thanksgiving, shark fin soup is to a Chinese wedding. In fact, not serving it can be seen as a sign of disrespect.

"They tried to convince us otherwise — it will look bad if you don't serve it! It will look cheap! There's no good alternative. Guests are expecting it — but we stood our ground," said Hui. "Regardless of the cultural pressure, we needed to stand up for what we believe in."

If anyone disapproved, they never said anything.

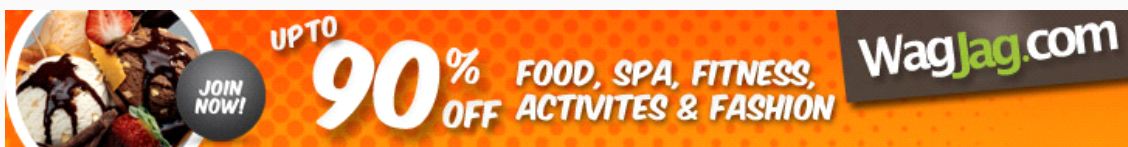
Three months later, the couple attended Kwok's cousin's wedding. No shark fin. And in October, Hui and Kwok are attending a friend's wedding in California, who also won't be serving the dish.

"Even if we didn't convert them entirely, we certainly opened the path to make the same decision we did," said Hui. "Any couple who chooses this route is making it better for the next couple to do it."

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