



Declining Shark Populations

Hong Kong's Central Role in the Global Shark Conservation Movement

Key Facts and Figures

Summary

Given the well-documented rate of declines in many shark populations, the implementation of measures to protect certain shark species from extinction should be seen as a priority.

Hong Kong is the center of the global shark fin trade. Therefore, shark conservation is one issue (other than the live reef fish trade) where action from Hong Kong is of global significance. A local solution can thus have a global impact.

1. Oceans at risk: A brief summary

- Last year, the United Nations announced that if the current rhythm of fishing remained unchanged, there would be no fish left in the oceans for humans to eat by **2048**.
- Currently, **more than 80%** of the world's fish stocks (including fisheries aquaculture) are either **overexploited** or **fully exploited**.
- In the past fifty years, numbers of top predators (such as sharks, tuna, salmon, cod and swordfish) have declined by **up to 90%** in some places.

2. Sharks on the fast track to extinction

- Sharks have been around for approximately **400 million years** and have survived **five mass extinctions**. Despite this, they are now threatened by overfishing, largely driven by the demand for shark fin.
- Up to **seventy-three million** sharks are estimated to be killed each year to satisfy the global appetite for shark fin and related products. This consumption pattern is unsustainable for many shark species.
- Sharks are particularly vulnerable to overfishing because they reproduce so slowly. Sharks are simply unable to recover from relentless fishing pressure because they are **long-lived, slow-growing, reach sexual maturity relatively late and often have relatively few offspring (pups)**. The International Union for the Conservation of Nature's 2010 Red List classified more than **one-third of shark species** (where there is sufficient data for assessment) as at **high risk of extinction**.
- Research indicates that **shark catches are vastly underestimated** and underreported: they may be **three to four times higher** than official figures.
- As apex predators the **ecological value** of sharks is indisputable and the need to protect them critical.

3. Hong Kong's role

3.1 Hong Kong: center of the global shark fin trade

- Whilst Hong Kong is one of the largest shark fin trading cities in the world, it is not a major shark fishing nation (Spain is the largest single exporter of shark fin into Hong Kong).
- From 2000 to 2008, Hong Kong imported in the range of **9,984 to 12,352 metric tons** (with an average of 10,684 metric tons annually) of shark fin-related products per year.
- There is **year-round demand** for shark fin in Hong Kong as it is a dish favored for special occasions, including wedding banquets.
- It is probable that Hong Kong, along with Guangdong Province (Canton) has one of the highest consumption rates in the world.

3.2 Endangered species on the Hong Kong Shark Fin market

- Approximately **40%** of the auctioned fin weight in the Hong Kong shark fin market comes from **14 shark species**, all of which have been listed in the **IUCN Red List of Threatened Species** (see Table 1).
- There are still **no species composition data** available for the remaining 60% of the auctioned fins.
- In addition, the basking shark (Vulnerable), whale shark (Vulnerable) and white-spotted guitarfish (*Rhynchobatus djiddensis*) (Vulnerable) have also found to be traded in Hong Kong.

Approximately 40% of the auctioned fin weight in Hong Kong fin market		
Trade category in Hong Kong	Species names	IUCN Red List status
Ya Jian	Blue shark (<i>Prionace glauca</i>)	Near Threatened
Qing Lian	Shortfin mako shark (<i>Isurus oxyrinchus</i>)	Vulnerable
Wu Yang	Silky shark (<i>Carcharhinus falciformis</i>)	Near Threatened
Hai Hu	Dusky shark (<i>Carcharhinus obscurus</i>)	Vulnerable
Bai Qing	Sandbar shark (<i>Carcharhinus plumbeus</i>)	Vulnerable
Ruan Sha	Tiger shark (<i>Galeocerdo cuvier</i>)	Near Threatened
Chun Chi	Smooth & Scalloped hammerhead shark (<i>Sphyrna zygaena</i> & <i>S. lewini</i>)	Vulnerable & Endangered
Gu Pian	Great hammerhead shark (<i>Sphyrna mokarran</i>)	Endangered
Wu Gu	Thresher shark (all 3 species) (<i>Alopias</i> spp.)	Vulnerable
Sha Qing	Bull shark (<i>Carcharhinus leucas</i>)	Near Threatened
Liu Qiu	Oceanic whitetip shark (<i>Carcharhinus longimanus</i>)	Vulnerable

Table 1 DNA analysis on Hong Kong auctioned shark fin Reference: Clarke et al. (2006a)

4. Existing legislation regulating shark finning & the shark fin trade

4.1 International

- CITES (Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species) lists only **three shark species** under Appendix II meaning that international trade in these species is simply monitored, and that vendors require a license in order to sell such products.
- Approximately **twenty-five countries and the European Union have prohibited shark finning** (slicing off a shark's fins and discarding the body at sea). Most of these bans are not well enforced due to lack of resources and or loopholes in the regulations.
- Most recently, Chile banned shark finning in its waters. In July 2011, Taiwan introduced legislation, effective from the start of 2012, requiring fishermen to bring sharks into port with their fins naturally attached.
- The **trade, possession, distribution and sale** of shark fin was banned in Hawaii in May of last year, followed by the states of Oregon, Washington, and the US territories of Guam and the North Mariana Islands in 2011. In July of this year, the Bahamas banned the commercial fishing of sharks as well as the import, export and sale of sharks.
- September 2011: the Californian State Senate passed a bill proposing the ban of the trade, possession, distribution and sale of shark fin in the state. Currently awaiting California Governor's signature. According to estimates, 85% of dried shark fin imports to the United States come through California.

4.2 Hong Kong

- Since Disney Hong Kong banned shark fin from its premises in June 2005, the shark conservation movement has been steadily gaining momentum in Hong Kong. The topic of shark conservation has had a continual presence in Hong Kong's media over the past year, with pressure from local NGOs and activists building. In July 2010, Citibank cancelled a shark fin promotion across Asia Pacific following pressure from local activists, and in January 2011, Dah Sing Bank scrapped a similar promotion. Other companies have since followed suit, including Groupon HK & Green Dot Dot.
- The Food Safety Ordinance has recently been extended to include fish, meaning that fishermen are obliged to keep a record of their commercial catches, in case of inspection. This does not have a direct impact on the shark fin trade.
- Apart from the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), there is **no regulation** to control the import of fish products into Hong Kong, even those considered endangered species. Furthermore, CITES only regulates international trade, so there are no restrictions on domestic trade.
- Currently, Hong Kong has **no labeling system** for most fishery products, including shark fins, and consequently most customers do not know if their bowl of shark fin was derived from a declining population or an endangered species.
- Attitudes to shark fin are changing in Hong Kong: in a recent survey, **85%** of respondents expressed **support for a ban** on the import of shark fin into Hong Kong; **78%** thought it **acceptable not to include shark fin soup** in a wedding banquet, and; **88%** believed that the **Hong Kong government should prohibit** the sale of products that involve killing endangered species.

Conclusion: There is a clear and pressing need for the HKSAR to act now.

Hong Kong has recently signed the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and, in September 2012, will be the site of the Seaweb Seafood Summit Conference. After the California State Senate voted to approve a ban on shark fin, all eyes are now on Hong Kong, as the global centre of the shark fin trade, to act.

Given that declining shark populations are shown to have a detrimental impact on marine biodiversity, that 40% of the shark fin traded in Hong Kong is from species listed on the IUCN's Red List and that there is currently no data to determine either the origin or species of the remaining 60%, it is clear that HKSAR needs to urgently re-evaluate its management of the shark-fin trade, and consider how to introduce measures to improve traceability within the trade.

Accordingly, BLOOM Hong Kong and Hong Kong Shark Foundation (HKSF) call upon the HKSAR Government to explore potential options to protect shark species from extinction.

About BLOOM Hong Kong

BLOOM is a non-profit organization dedicated to marine conservation created with a view to protecting vulnerable marine species and habitats as well as promoting sustainable fisheries. BLOOM was launched in Hong Kong in 2009 on June 8th, World Ocean Day. The principal & most urgent focus of BLOOM's work is saving sharks from extinction. In April 2011, BLOOM released the results of the most comprehensive research into shark consumption habits & attitudes in Hong Kong ever. The New York Times/International Herald Tribune coverage of this research can be viewed [here](#).

To find out more about BLOOM, please visit: www.bloomassociation.org

About Hong Kong Shark Foundation (HKSF)

HKSF is a Hong Kong based charity dedicated to raising awareness of the plight of sharks and to reducing consumption of shark products, primarily sharks fin soup. Our message is one of sustainability and our work comprises grassroots consumer awareness raising campaigns, educational programmes, corporate advocacy and political lobbying. HKSF is also a member of the global shark conservation organisation Shark Alliance and works collaboratively with like-minded organisations both in Hong Kong and around the globe.

For more information, please visit:

www.hksharkfoundation.org

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