

Shark Finning: The Thin Edge

[Georgia Woodroffe](#) dives into the brutal world of shark finning

Thursday 25 September 2014

What comes to mind when you hear the word 'shark'?; for many, the theme tune of the film 'Jaws' and a sense of terror. Media representations have labelled the shark as man's enemy. It is no wonder they are one of the most feared animals on earth. On average sharks kill 5 people annually. Compare this to vending machines which kill 13 people, while icicles kill 100 people annually in Russia alone— and you can see how distorted our fears are. Especially as out of the 500 species of shark, only a handful have had encounters with humans.

Mass media advertises many threatened species – for instance pandas and elephants – as vulnerable, huggable and loveable creatures. Sharks are less appealing to the general public, and our often apathetic image of them allows their dire situation in the wild to be overlooked. Last year though 73,000,000 sharks were killed, primarily for their fins. Recent studies show that certain species have reduced by 95-99% in some regions — which is considered 'functional extinction'.

The shark fin market is a lucrative business. Fishermen desperate to feed their families are driven to extremes; most of the profit goes to a handful of wealthy businessmen. Shark fins are the key ingredient for shark fin soup, a historic dish of Asian culture. It is popular due to its cultural associations with health and prosperity. One bowl can cost upwards of £65. But as the demand increases the supply diminishes.



Photo credit: Laurence Cymet

In the brutal fishing process sharks are usually dragged, whilst alive, onto fishing boats. Heated knives are used to slice off the fins. Then the shark is thrown back into the sea to bleed to death, or left to suffocate on the boat.

Shark meat is considered detrimental to human health. Due to being an apex predator, the meat has a high mercury content. A single serving of shark steak can cause mercury poisoning, with the possible side effects of sterility, birth defects, and nervous system damage.

One international charity which is trying to raise awareness and help protect sharks is called 'Shark Angels'. Set up in 2007, the charity uses media and education campaigns to inspire people to protect sharks.

Jamie Pollock is a Shark Angel based in New York. She told me in an interview 'the most rewarding moment in our work is when we see our hard work making a difference [...] We have had several states become Fin Free, including Massachusetts this year. We also feel very rewarded as more Shark Angel clubs are being created and more youth are becoming shark advocates'. For Jamie, informing people about sharks and showing them how misunderstood these predators are is why she does the job.

'Shark Angels' helps in scientific research. Many Shark Angels are scientists and marine biologists whose work contributes to the preservation of sharks and the oceans. 'Shark Angels' help via volunteering, funding, data collection, and the provision of supplies and logistics. In terms of funding, last year 'Shark Angels' began sponsoring scientist Jéssica Escobar-Porras and her work on shark populations; Jéssica uses shark DNA to determine their range, population and origin.

Shark Angels have also formed a partnership with the Watermen Project. The project uses non-invasive and non-harmful methods to monitor sharks. Biopsies and tagging performed only through free-diving.

Sharks are sat at the top of the oceans' food chain, and have helped keep the seas healthy and balanced for over 400 million years. If shark fin malls in China continue to sell over 100 million fins each, or a single port in Japan continue to land, 7,000 sharks each day, these magnificent creatures will no longer exist. For the sake of the environment, and all who are affected by it, the fishing needs to stop.



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