



Finning **Our Future**

73 million sharks a year are being served up to make celebration soup

by Laurel Beauprie

It wouldn't be news if I told you our planet has its environmental problems. Sure, we're making some progress in controlling what we put into the air, put into our landfills and even put into our oceans. But we're not paying enough attention to what we are taking out of our oceans – sharks – and they're being killed at the rate of up to 73 million per year. That's million with a capital M and it refers to the number being killed only for their fins and almost entirely to make shark fin soup. You may not really care much about sharks but our oceans account for about half of the planet's oxygen supply and sharks play a key role in maintaining the health of those oceans.

I have to admit that until recently I didn't know much about sharks, or care to. Then I saw the television documentary "Sharkwater" and it changed forever the way I look at sharks. So I decided to do some research myself and, lo and behold, they weren't exaggerating a bit; the bulk of the shark population is being depleted for their fins.

If I was referring to the ever-happy dolphin or a baby seal instead of sharks, I'd have people lined up behind me. But, one mention of the "S" word sends a shiver down many a spine. Maybe you've seen the movie "Jaws" or heard a man-eating shark story, or both. Even if you've never seen a shark outside of your local city aquarium you probably still think of him as the villain. If you feel this way, you're not alone, but it might surprise you to know that although there are more than 350 distinct species of sharks, only a few even bother with humans. The giant Whale Shark doesn't even have teeth.

Now old Mother Nature really took her time when she created these nearly perfect beasts. Shark-like fish have been in existence for about 400 million years and even before the dinosaurs. She put them in every ocean but, because they are resilient, she built in a number of natural

controllers: relatively short life spans (20 to 30 years), long gestation periods, small number of young, and slow maturity rates. With all this, they basically regulate themselves. But what she didn't count on was the human factor.

As of late 2009, the world's population of sharks had already diminished by 50 to 75%. A North Atlantic population survey reports as much as an 89% decrease. Also the stats from the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources "IUCN" Red List of Threatened Species show that for the 181 species of sharks for which they have adequate data, over 64% of those popula-

tions are noted as "threatened" or "vulnerable". Of those, over 21% are categorized as "endangered" or worse. At least one species is already listed as "extinct in the wild." Sharks are a big link in the eco-chain and you'd deserve a gold star if you are questioning why, if sharks were entrusted with

something as important as ocean balance, we would allow their populations to be depleted at this alarming rate.

Millions of sharks are unintended catch or "bycatch" every year but sadly, far more are harvested merely for their fins. Sharks are pulled onto fishing boats where their fins are cut off and their bodies are thrown back into the ocean as waste. A large percentage of these animals are still alive and suffocate. Even though less than 5% of the shark is fin, the rest is usually thrown away because of the economics of it. Shark meat must be properly refrigerated and takes up a lot of space on a boat. Fins, however, can be cut off, bundled, and hung to dry in large nets. It is the fin that produces the largest profit by far and can be sold for hundreds of dollars per pound.

Now, it could be easily understood if we were talking about fishing, or even overfishing, to feed people. However, most sharks are harvested to make shark fin soup, or what is known in some cultures as "celebration soup," and the

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fin is little more than an additive or garnish. This once rare delicacy is now available at a vast number of restaurants even though the fin is primarily tasteless, has little nutritional value, and is added to a mainly chicken or other meat based soup.

Sharks are the ocean's apex predator because they are at top of the food chain and they have few predators. But this high rank doesn't come without duties; they are in charge of helping to keep the ocean's delicate balance of other fish and some marine mammals. Because they seem to eat whatever there is most of, they help control the overpopulation of any one species. This in turn keeps that species from depleting its food source, and so on, right to the last link in the food chain. On the bottom rung is where you'd find plant plankton or "phytoplankton." This little gem is what produces our oxygen. But this oxygen producer is already on a decline. Less oxygen production means that there is more carbon dioxide in our air and that can contribute to global warming.

If that wasn't enough, the removal of sharks can impact the entire ocean ecosystem causing a disruption of the ocean's balance. This is called "cascading" – when a decrease in one presence causes an increase in another, and so on. A diminished shark population leaves more of the middle prey and in turn decreases their prey. This would include "bivalves" like oysters, scallops and clams. "Bivalves" are part of the ocean ecosystem, not to mention one of our food sources. Significant ocean imbalances can produce decreased ocean oxygen resulting in dead zones, making it non-livable. Ocean imbalance is nasty business right from top to bottom.

It's frightening enough to think that by allowing shark finning we jeopardize their entire existence for the simple prestige of eating expensive soup. But when the shark population is depleted, no amount of money will be able to re-

verse the damage to our oxygen supply, ecosystems, fishing industries, and possibly a great deal of our own food supply, all in one fell swoop. Of course even the top experts are still learning about the intricacies of our ocean ecosystems and there is likely more than one opinion on what the biggest environmental problem is. But I'm sure most would agree that the basic law of nature is not to disrupt the food chain. Sort of a "don't break it first" and then try to figure out if it can be fixed later, idea.

Most countries now have laws against endangering the population of wild animals. Like elephants killed for only their ivory tusks or gorillas for trophies, it's still not too late to stop killing sharks for their fins. If we want to undo the damage we have done to most species, we must move quickly.

Unfortunately, although some countries have laws against local shark finning, even Canada still allows the unlimited import of shark fin, with the exception of "CITES" (Convention of International Trade in Endangered Species) listed endangered species. However the identification of species by the fin is extremely difficult as most are pre-skinned and dried prior to inspection sampling. The only way to be sure that the fin is not from an endangered species is DNA testing. Therefore, only a real change in the importing and fisheries regulations of any shark product worldwide, will allow their populations to recover. Tough new measures would have to include a ban on importing or exporting fins. With this, we can stop the damage the suppliers do.

The great prophet Nostradamus made predictions for the winter solstice of 2012. In those he included a great change in our environment, possibly even the destruction of it. It's possible he may have foreseen the extinction of sharks being the first fall in a line of environmental dominos.

Maybe when we stop the senseless depletion of sharks our future will be back on the menu, in place of "celebration soup." Now that would be something to celebrate.



Laurel Beauprie enjoys all kinds of writing and is working on a novel. When she's not writing, you'll find her on the golf course.

Some countries (like Canada) have laws against local shark finning, but still allow the unlimited import of shark fin.

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Next issue March 2010

