



Issues Facing Sharks

A heavy footprint

Our impact on the oceans over the last century has been greater than all previous centuries combined. We are quickly changing the oceans' chemistry, temperature and biodiversity while at the same time, only just beginning to understand these changes' implications. We know so little really; we are still learning about the oceans' important role in our climate, atmosphere, and planet, still exploring their depths, and still discovering their inhabitants. And as we slowly build our knowledgebase, pollution, habitat destruction, global warming and overfishing are ravaging our seas – and all that dwell within.

The short end of every stick

Sharks sit at the forefront of this lethal combination of catastrophes, vulnerable to all. Sharks are being fished at the rate of 100,000,000 sharks per year. Although regional populations of large sharks have all but disappeared in places like the North Atlantic where their numbers are down by 95%, they are still being hunted into oblivion probably during our lifetimes. Bottom-dwelling sharks are chased by trawlers, whose fishing practices are so destructive, the muddy telltale signs of the underwater bulldozers demolishing the sea beds can be seen from satellites. And pelagic sharks frequently join the 43 million tons of bycatch caught by fisherman on long-lines and nets.

And sharks cannot sustain the fishing pressure that other bony fish can. You see, sharks reproduce far slower. Other types of fish tend to reach sexual maturity quickly—perhaps within a year—and lay millions of eggs each year. In contrast, sharks reach sexual maturity after ten or more years and then produce very few offspring. This makes it even harder for sharks to naturally recover from such relentless overfishing.

At the same time, sharks are also struggling with the contamination of their environment. Not only have sharks absorbed the highly toxic methyl-mercury which compromises, amongst other things, their ability to reproduce successfully, but now scientists are also finding other strange neuro-toxins (possibly linked to brain diseases like Parkinson's and Alzheimer's) in their flesh. Chemicals, whether dumped or run-off, enter the food chain and become concentrated as they make their way up the food chain. Even the tons and tons of plastics in our ocean – forming two “islands” twice the size of Texas in the Pacific and Indian oceans – are decomposing to a point that the polymer particles, which will take hundreds if not thousands of years to dissipate, are consumed. Some seawater has 7 times more plastic in it than zooplankton, and so this plastic poison also enters the food chain. All of these chemicals are literally poisoning the sharks – and anyone who dares to eat them. For more information, read “**Mercury in Sharks**” factsheet.

As if not threatened enough, the struggling sharks are also battling with the destruction of habitat. Many sharks and rays rely upon estuaries as nurseries for their young. And sadly, estuaries around the world are disappearing. Not only are the fragile ecosystems more susceptible to pollution and overfishing, they are often considered prime real estate. Many estuaries have fallen victim – either directly or due to the topographical changes urban development force.

Hunted into extinction

But in addition to the factors challenging other marine creatures, sharks face an even more urgent threat: the demand for their fins is skyrocketing increasing their value exponentially. Indeed a single whale shark fin can sell for upwards of \$50,000 USD. As the demand for shark fin far outweighs supply, no sharks are safe from desperate fisherman – and sharks everywhere – even the handful that are protected and in the few areas that are protected - are under attack. In the last 50 years the slaughter of sharks has risen by 400% and by 2017, it is anticipated that 20 species of shark could become extinct.

And make no mistake, the process is brutal - particularly for a sentient, intelligent creature that does indeed experiences pain. Sharks, often alive, are pulled from the oceans after fighting for hours if not days on long lines, to have their fins sliced off with a hot blade. Then, they are thrown back into the sea, unable to move, to die a slow and painful death – either suffocating, bleeding to death or being eaten alive.

All for a bowl of soup.

Shark fin soup, a traditional cultural delicacy, has been a highlight at important occasions such as corporate banquets, weddings, and New Year's celebrations for over centuries. But, over the last 30 years, the number of people eating shark's fin has risen from a few million in the 1980's to more than 300 million today. Shark fin is a tasteless ingredient in this culturally important soup that is so highly sought after given its association with health, prosperity and good fortune, it can sell for upwards of \$100 a bowl. And while the supply is plummeting, the demand for shark fin soup is at an all time high, putting our planet's sharks, and health, at risk.

Indeed, the incredibly lucrative market for shark fins is more than any other factor, driving the slaughter. And this extinction trade full of greed and corruption is often likened to the illegal drug trade, as it is rife with murder, mafia, and millions of dollars. Fisherman frantic to feed their families will stop at nothing and are being driven to extremes, though it is only a handful of individuals (wholesale traders and middlemen) who are benefiting – at an incredible cost to all of us.

There are no international laws that are effective in stopping this destruction of sharks, with no governing bodies assigned to implement them, let alone enforce them. Sharks will continue to be ruthlessly hunted until we all do our part and stop creating demand.



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