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Efforts to End Shark Finning Make Progress

BARBARA KLEIN: This is SCIENCE IN THE NEWS in VOA Special English. I'm Barbara Klein.

BOB DOUGHTY: And I'm Bob Doughty. Each year, fishermen catch millions of sharks and cut off their fins. The animal is unable to swim and often left to die in the ocean.

Shark fins are used to make shark fin soup, which is popular in parts of Asia. Today, we tell about the shark fin trade. And we report on efforts to protect shark populations.

(MUSIC)

BARBARA KLEIN: Industry experts and wildlife activists say more than seventy-three million sharks are killed every year -- mostly for their fins -- to make shark fin soup. That is about two hundred thousand sharks every day. Shark fin soup is traditionally served at large gatherings in parts of East Asia. It also can be found at many Asian restaurants around the world.

Recently, a team of scientists and environmental groups collected shark fin soup from restaurants across the United States. They wanted to study the genetic material in the soup. The scientists examined fifty-one soup samples from fourteen American cities. DNA testing identified eight shark species, some of them endangered.

Liz Karan leads the international shark conservation campaign at the Pew Environment Group.

LIZ KARAN: "The major finding is that there are endangered species in shark fin soup being sold in the United States. So, there is one sample taken from Boston that had scalloped hammerhead... Scalloped hammerhead is considered endangered by the International Union of Conservation of Nature's red list for endangered species."

BOB DOUGHTY: Sharks are important to the health of the ocean. They eat injured and diseased fish. Their hunting means other fish do not become too great in number. This protects other creatures and plants in the ocean. Shark

finning is banned in the United States. Federal law requires sharks to be brought to port before their fins are cut. But shark fishing and the import of fins are permitted in most states. Five states have banned shark fin products. Yet finning is taking place in other areas of the world. Liz Karan says the ban is difficult to enforce.

LIZ KARAN: "Overfishing of sharks is a global problem. Hong Kong is currently the hub of the shark fin trade, and there are about eighty some-odd countries that contribute to that trade."

The Pew Environment Group says the number of sharks has dropped almost eighty percent worldwide in the past sixty years. The group believes sanctuaries, or safe places, for sharks could help, especially when the animals are young and defenseless. Liz Karan says sharks are at risk for a number of reasons.

LIZ KARAN: "They have very long life spans and often don't reach sexual maturity until their teens or twenties, and then when they do reproduce, some species only have maybe a couple of pups at a time. So their ability to repopulate and recover from overfishing pressures is very small."

BARBARA KLEIN: The Humane Society International leads one of the largest campaigns to protect sharks. Iris Ho is the group's wildlife campaigns manager.

IRIS HO: "Over ninety percent of the world's shark fin consumption takes place in China, and Hong Kong alone handles about fifty percent of the global trade in shark fins."

Iris Ho says the United States is the second-largest market for shark fins.

IRIS HO: "According to, to the government records, in two thousand ten, thirty-four metric tons of shark fins were imported into the U.S."

Sharks have been alive for four hundred million years. They were living even before the earliest dinosaurs. But some scientists believe they may be unable to survive the current demand for shark-fin soup.

(MUSIC)

BOB DOUGHTY: Shark fin has been considered a special treat in Chinese culture since the Ming emperors first demanded it more than four hundred years ago. However, as we noted earlier, the methods of harvesting the fish mean shark populations are increasingly endangered.

Earlier this year in Hong Kong, more than one hundred fifty activists gathered to

publicize the environmental and animal welfare issues linked to the shark fin trade. The activists called on the new head of the Hong Kong government to ban the use of shark fin at official dinners.

BARBARA KLEIN: Rachel Vickerstaff is with the Hong Kong Shark Foundation. She says the Hong Kong shark fin market is worth more than five hundred million dollars a year. Earlier this year, she explained what the activists hoped to do.

RACHEL VICKERSTAFF: "Our objectives today really are to get some public awareness of what we're trying to do and to let C.Y. (, C.Y. Leung – the new head of the Hong Kong government) know if he needs to see why sharks need saving."

Sharks do receive some protection under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, known as CITES. But Rachel Vickerstaff says the agreement must be strengthened.

RACHEL VICKERSTAFF: "The Hong Kong government has hidden behind CITES, which is pretty ineffective. CITES only has international trade restrictions on three species of sharks. But the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, the IUCN, lists well over a hundred species of sharks as already threatened or near threatened with extinction."

BOB DOUGHTY: Shark fin is served in soups at business and social gatherings as a sign of social standing. A bowl of shark fin soup can cost more than one hundred dollars. The dorsal fin of a whale shark can sell for up to twenty-thousand dollars. As China's economy grows, more and more Chinese are serving shark fin soup as a sign to show their increasing wealth. The World Wildlife Fund says China's economic success has caused the trade in shark fins to grow about five percent a year. The group says "serving shark fin soup may be a sign of wealth, but it comes at a price that our oceans cannot afford."

Wildlife activists say the overfishing of sharks has a bad effect on the ocean environment. But they say there is some good news. Younger generations in China are increasingly unwilling to eat shark fin.

Nina Whittaker is one of them. She is a student at Li Po Chun United World College in Hong Kong. She says many young people object to the way fishermen harvest shark fins.

NINA WHITTAKER: "They will take sharks on board and cut their fins off and throw the live sharks without their fins overboard. And they can't swim without them so they'll end up drowning and it's a very painful and unpleasant death. And so you just have piles and piles and piles of fins, and the hundreds and hundreds of shark carcasses in the sea. Such a waste!"

Nina Whittaker says she does not even enjoy the taste of shark fin soup.

NINA WHITTAKER: "Having shark fins in your soup, it's a cultural thing to some extent -- but it's not an excuse. They have high levels of mercury in them, and they don't really have that much taste: it's basically chicken soup with jelly, so..."

BARBARA KLEIN: Gary Stokes is with the wildlife conservation group Sea Shepherd. He says the value of shark fins puts them in the same grouping as illegal drugs and weapons. He recently filmed Hong Kong businessmen drying tens of thousands of shark fins on the city's sidewalks.

GARY STOKES: "A shipment had come in, and it was obviously a little bit still damp, and they needed to move it on to China. But, instead of the secrecy they normally have -- which it's all kept behind closed doors, on roofs, and -- it was actually in a main highway, in a street, so...Just a rough estimation there, there was forty-one thousand fins there."

Wildlife groups say forty respected scientists signed a statement in support of ending the shark fin trade. The statement was given to the Hong Kong government earlier this year.

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BOB DOUGHTY: In early September, the Hong Kong-based carrier Cathay Pacific announced it would stop shipping unsustainably sourced shark products. The company said its decision was based on the vulnerable nature of sharks, their rapidly declining population, and the effects of overfishing for their parts and products. It added, "We believe that we now have compelling evidence that the majority of shark fishing is incompatible with our position on sustainable development."

Environmental groups praised Cathay Pacific's decision. But people in the shark fin industry saw it as a threat to their businesses.

BARBARA KLEIN: Earlier, the Chinese government announced plans to ban shark fin soup from being served at official dinners. The move was seen as an attempt to protect shark populations and reduce spending at government events.

In July, the Communist Party-controlled Global Times said it would take about three years to remove shark fins from the menus of official events. The Reuters news service reported that some Chinese reacted angrily to the announcement. One man asked, "You have to wait three years to do this?" Another said "ordinary people eat starch noodles." He said "officials use the people's money to eat shark fin."

Chinese media say over ninety-five percent of the yearly harvest of shark fin is eaten on the Chinese mainland, Hong Kong and Taiwan. The Chinese ban would only apply to government activities and would not affect the eating of shark fin by the general population.

(MUSIC)

BOB DOUGHTY: This SCIENCE IN THE NEWS was written by Christopher Cruise, with reporting from Zulima Palacio and Ivan Broadhead. Our producer was June Simms. I'm Bob Doughty.

BARBARA KLEIN: And I'm Barbara Klein. You can comment on this story on our website, voaspecialenglish.com. You also can follow us on Facebook, Twitter, and iTunes and at our YouTube Channel, all at VOA Learning English. Join us again next week for more news about science in Special English on the Voice of America.