

January 5, 2006
Manta Journal

Hidden Cost of Shark Fin Soup: Its Source May Vanish

By [JUAN FORERO](#)

MANTA, Ecuador - Early every morning, the cold water lapping up on the beach here is stained red with blood as surly, determined men in ragged T-shirts drag hundreds of shark carcasses off wooden skiffs and onto the white sand.

Using eight-inch boning knives with quick precision, they dismember the once-mighty predators, cutting off heads, carving up big slabs of meat, slashing off the tails. Most important, they cut off the fins - dorsal and pectorals - a "set" that can fetch \$100 or more.

"That is what is really important, the fins," said Luis Salto, 57, as he cut up sharks. "They sell in China."

Indeed, the fins are exported in a quasi-legal network to Hong Kong, Beijing, Taiwan, Singapore and other corners of Asian affluence. There, a heaping bowl of shark fin soup, said to offer medicinal or aphrodisiac qualities, is dished up for up to \$200.

This taste for fins, marine biologists say, is ridding the world's oceans of one of its most ancient creatures, threatening ecosystems already buffeted by overfishing. Some sharks, like the hammerhead and the great white, have been reduced by upwards of 70 percent in the last 15 years, while others, like the silky white tip, have disappeared from the Caribbean.

"If you go to any reef around the world, except for those that are really protected, the sharks are gone," said Ransom Myers, a marine biologist at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. "Their value is so great that completely harmless sharks, like whale sharks, are killed, for their fins."

The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization conservatively estimates that 856,000 tons of shark and their cousins, rays and skates, were caught in 2003. That is triple the quantity 50 years before, as shark fin soup has caught on as an Asian status symbol.

Fins sell for as much as \$700 per kilogram in Asia, making big sharks worth thousands of dollars. In the vast dried seafood market of Sai Ying Pun on Hong Kong Island on a recent day, shark fin stores had no shortage of buyers.

"Serving shark fins in banquets is a tradition for Chinese people," said Chiu Ching-cheung, chairman of the Shark Fin Trade Merchants' Association in Hong Kong. "Without shark fin, a Chinese banquet does not look like one at all."

Shark fin soup - which can have mushrooms, fine dried ham, other seafood and clear chicken stock or water, simmered for up to eight hours - is common at wedding banquets or other celebrations. Served to impress guests, it has grown more popular, environmentalists say, as China's middle class has expanded.

"Catching sharks, for a lot of fishermen, was not a viable financial proposition because the meat was of low value," said Peter Knights, executive director of Wild Aid, a San Francisco-based environmental group. "That's all changed now because the fins are so valuable."

While Asia's environmental movement has grown, with aid of stars like Jackie Chan and the director Ang Lee, experts say education on overfishing is an uphill battle. With the waters off Asia largely depleted, fishermen are focusing on regions that still swarm with sharks, like the cold, deep waters of the Pacific from Peru north to Central America.

On a recent day, Captain Nelson Laje, 42, piloted a 60-ton trawler, La Ahijada, into Manta's port, its hold filled with 150 blues and threshers, among the most common of Pacific sharks. His crew tied chains around bundles of sharks, which were hoisted onto the wharf to be quickly heaved onto refrigerated trucks.

"They do not want us to capture the sharks, but we need them to pay our expenses and make a living," Mr. Laje said. "The shark, the fishing, will never end. Fishing will only end when the water ends."

Some of the world's richest fishing grounds, full of everything from tuna to white fish of all kinds, are found off this tiny Andean country. There are also up to 38 species of shark.

By a conservative estimate, more than 279,000 pounds of shark fins, representing about 300,000 sharks, were exported from Ecuador to China and Hong Kong in 2003, twice as much as in the mid-1990's. Under pressure from environmental groups, Ecuador prohibited exporting shark fins in 2004. Fishing for sharks is also illegal, though fishermen are permitted to possess and sell sharks they catch incidentally.

But with resources for enforcement inadequate and an influential fishing industry bucking regulations, Ecuador's government has been unable to contain shark fishing, the exportation of fins or the internationally reviled practice of finning, where the fins of sharks are sliced off on the high seas and the carcass is left behind, environmentalists and the Environment Ministry say.

More than 60 countries have banned finning since 2004.

Alfredo Carrasco, an Environment Ministry official who oversees natural resources management, acknowledged that the lack of resources permits "illegal actions." But he also put blame on Asian countries, where fin imports are legal.

Eloy Chiquito, 43, begins his day at 5 a.m., when he arrives at Manta's beach with his knife. Mr. Chiquito says he knows the shark population is being cut back. But he argues that there are still days when hundreds of sharks are dragged onto the beach, a sign to him that shark populations remain healthy. "We can get 50 or hundreds," he said.

When Antonio Llambo, a navy inspector, arrived on a recent day to warn about fines and other penalties, the men with the knives barely glanced up. The buyers did not lose a step, scrambling over shark carcasses with fistfuls of dollars.

"That's the dynamic in Ecuador - people do what is illegal," Mr. Llambo said, with a look of resignation.

Alyssa Lau contributed reporting from Hong Kong for this article.