

Shark guardians see momentum to save top predator

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A Great White shark jumps out of the water as it hunts Cape fur seals near False Bay, South Africa. Shark defenders hope to capitalize on a series of victories in their fight against the lucrative fin trade, releasing a report calling for sanctuaries to save the world's oldest predator.

Shark defenders hope to capitalize on a series of victories in their fight against the lucrative fin trade, releasing a report Monday calling for sanctuaries to save the world's oldest predator.

As legislation inches forward in California to ban the import and purchase of fins used in gourmet Chinese soups -- source of the global shark population crash -- activists are pushing for a sanctuary in the Bahamas in a bid to halt drastic overfishing that sees 73 million [sharks](#) killed each year.

"We've begun removing them from the oceans at an unprecedented rate

in their 400-million-year history," Global Shark Conservation at the Pew Environment Group (PEG) director Matt Rand told AFP, as activists heading the conservation movement convened in Washington last week for a strategy meet.

"They predate dinosaurs by about 100 million years, and somehow survived the extinction that killed those creatures. But they're not surviving the situation they're in today. All for a bowl of soup."

Hunger for their fins has exploded with the growing practice of "finning" -- hacking off fins from the live animals and throwing them back in the water to die -- responsible for a 90 percent decline for some species.

Some 30 percent of all [shark species](#) are immediately threatened or near threatened with extinction, according to the report.

The sharks' own biology make them especially vulnerable to [overfishing](#) as they are more akin to mammals like whales and dolphins, reaching [sexual maturity](#) in their teens, and then only have a few pups at a time.

Activists hope to replicate Palau's success story.

In a landmark 2009 move, the Pacific territory became what Rand called a "preeminent champion" in shark conservation, as the first nation to declare its waters -- about the size of Texas -- a shark safe haven.

The Maldives followed suit a year later, and Honduras has a moratorium on finning.

But if the Bahamas resolves to make such a commitment, Rand said, its wealth of sharks and dedicated shark tourists could make it the "crown jewel of shark conservation in the Atlantic."

Financial reasoning is a key weapon in the defenders' arsenal: according to a Pew-commissioned study released last month, a single reef shark can be worth nearly \$2 million in tourism revenue over its lifetime.

In the Bahamas, similarly, the shark diving industry is already worth some \$80 million a year, a figure likely to rise if a sanctuary is imposed, said Bahamas National Trust Council executive director Eric Carey.

The payoff appears fruitful, but fishermen who have seen their regular fish stocks decline in recent years have been particularly receptive to raiders of the pervasive fin trade who reach out to communities wherever sharks are found, touting the fins' high value at around \$700 per kilo.

In California, the ban moving through the state house builds on the US Shark Conservation Act, signed by President Barack Obama in January, which clamps down on finning.

The measure is seen as strongly backed by California voters, but has divided the West Coast state's Asian-American communities.

It's seen especially stiff opposition from lawmakers with strong Chinese constituencies, where the practice is defended as a tradition, and the proposed law slammed as an attack on heritage.

"Shark fin soup is considered an honored traditional delicacy and is served at many of our sacred occasions," Fiona Ma, a San Francisco Democrat, told The San Diego Union Tribune.

The effort to stem the biggest demand -- from the Chinese mainland, and Hong Kong -- is a key aim for the movement.

Just how to do that, though, remains a major question.

"If the dynamics of the trade are not changed quickly, we will lose many species of sharks within a generation," Rand warned amid the days-long strategy sessions in Washington last week, where the Pew group was joined by dive shop owners and ecologists from around the world.

In a rare boost for activists from within the Asian giant, billionaire delegate Ding Liguo at the National People's Congress proposed a shark fin trade ban earlier this year in the face of huge opposition.

In a bid to shift in opinion there, he insisted "only legislation can stop shark fin trading and reduce the killings of sharks."

Saving the top marine predators means "using this growing momentum," according to Karen Sack, Pew Environment Group's director of International Ocean Conservation, who urged the visiting shark activists "to keep bringing it to the desks" of those in a position to affect change.

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