

Sharks saved from soupy fate set free at sea

September 6 2011, by Didier Lauras



An environmental activist releases a baby black-tip shark into the sea as part of an operation organised by the sharks protection group Dive Tribe off the coast of the southern Thai sea resort of Pattaya.

Saved from the soup bowl at a Thai restaurant, the baby shark wriggled out of the bag and into the open sea -- a rare survivor of a trade that kills millions of the predators each year.

On average an estimated 22,000 tonnes of sharks are caught annually off Thailand for their fins -- a delicacy in Chinese cuisine once enjoyed only by the rich, but now increasingly popular with the wealthier middle class.

Thanks to a group of [environmental activists](#) calling themselves the Dive Tribe, dozens of sharks were returned to the wild in the Gulf of Thailand recently, bought from animal markets or restaurants.

Among them were several young bamboo and black tip reef sharks which narrowly avoided ending up as [shark fin soup](#) -- prized in particular by the Chinese who believe it boosts sexual potency.

Gwyn Mills, founder of Dive Tribe, laments the fact that the plight of sharks is largely overlooked compared to animals such as elephants and tigers.

He fears it may be only five or 10 years before the damage is irreversible.

"We are losing too many sharks. We can't afford to take any more out of the ocean," Mills said.

Scientists blame the practice of shark-finning -- slicing off the fins of live animals and then throwing them back in the water to die -- for a worldwide collapse in populations of the predators, which have been swimming since the time of the dinosaurs.

The maritime conservation group Oceana estimates that up to 73 million sharks are finned each year around the world, depleting many populations by as much as 90 percent.

Although the shark is portrayed as an insatiable man-eater in Steven Spielberg's hit 1975 movie "Jaws", naturalists say most species pose no danger to humans.

"Actually attacks on people are rare," said Jean-Christophe Thomas, a scuba instructor involved in the shark release.



Environmental activists transfer a baby bamboo shark in a water-filled plastic bag onto a boat. Dozens of sharks purchased from animal markets or restaurants were returned to the wild in the Gulf of Thailand.

On Saturday, 60 sharks left their temporary home at the "Underwater World" aquarium in the Thai resort city of Pattaya in plastic bags filled with water. Loaded onto a boat, they were released one by one back into the wild.

"I was carrying the plastic bag and did not even notice when he left," said Wayne Phillips, a lecturer in marine ecology at Mahidol University.

"But I like that. He was not given freedom. He took it. He was living in a tank, then in a plastic bag. He's better here."

While the release was a largely symbolic event designed to raise awareness, the stakes are real.

Environmentalists say that sharks, particularly the apex predators, play a vital role in the marine ecosystem.

"So if we protect the sharks, the rest of the reef will be protected," said Phillips. "We need to make people realise how important sharks are."

Environmentalists argue that sharks are slow to reproduce, making them unsuitable for commercial fishing.

Some types of shark species, including the great white and the hammerhead, are endangered, threatened or vulnerable, according to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature.

Some countries are taking action.

The tiny Pacific nation of Palau declared the world's first shark sanctuary in 2009, prompting similar moves by the Maldives and Honduras.

Taiwan, one of the world's major shark catchers, is moving to tighten measures against hunting the predator while the Malaysian state of Sabah on Borneo island is also seeking to ban shark fishing.

The members of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) also adopted a resolution in 1994 on shark conservation and management.



A baby bamboo shark swims over a coral reef in the southern coast of Pattaya following its release into the sea as part of an operation organised by the sharks protection group Dive Tribe. On Saturday, 60 sharks left their temporary home

at the "Underwater World" aquarium in Pattaya to be released one by one back into the wild.

And in 1999, the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation adopted an International Plan of Action for the Conservation and Management of Sharks.

But a report by the wildlife trade monitoring network Traffic and the Pew Environmental Group released in January said not enough was being done to implement that plan.

"International concern about shark stocks continues to grow because of an increasing body of evidence that many shark species are threatened and are continuing to decline as a result of unregulated fishing", it said.

Activists believe the best hope of reversing the situation is to highlight the benefits of sharks to the tourism industry.

The animals are a major attraction for snorkelers and scuba divers, but it is increasingly rare to see the creatures in the seas off Thailand.

Mills argued that one reef shark is worth many times more to the tourist industry than it would fetch in a restaurant. He thinks fishermen should be compensated for releasing the sharks that get entangled in their nets.

While swimming with sharks is a joy for many scuba divers and naturalists, for some the shark remains a creature to be feared -- an image unlikely to be helped by the upcoming release of the Hollywood movie "Shark Night 3D".

The film tells the fictional story of a group of carefree teenagers killed

off one by one by hungry [sharks](#) in a salt lake in Louisiana.

According to the International Shark Attack File, compiled at the University of Florida, 79 unprovoked shark attacks occurred around the world in 2010, six of which were fatal. This was the highest number in a decade and an increase of 25 percent on 2009.

For Dive Tribe and other shark lovers, the battle is only just beginning.

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