

Hong Kong's shark fin traders feel pressure to change

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A man inside a shark fin store in Hong Kong on November 26. The owner of Shark's Fin City, a dried fin wholesaler in Hong Kong's quarter for all things shrivelled, says there are only a few people who know the truth about sharks, and he's one of them.

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Like many Hong Kong businessmen who trade in shark fins, Kwong Hung-kwan believes his industry is being targeted by an anti-Chinese conspiracy led by "Western" environmental groups like [Greenpeace](#).

Talk of a dramatic decline in [shark populations](#) around the world is rubbish, he says, dismissing research showing an eight-fold jump in

threatened [shark species](#) since 2000.

Experts agree that much of that rise is linked to increases in consumption of shark meat, especially fins used in traditional Chinese [shark fin soup](#), an expensive staple at weddings and banquets in this southern Chinese city.

"Shark fins represent our [Chinese tradition](#). It used to be served only to royalty and is, even now, a very luxurious cuisine from the deep sea," Kwong told AFP at his store in Hong Kong's Des Voeux Road area.

The western end of Des Voeux Road and nearby Queen's Road West, not far from the Central business district, are a hive of musty shops selling a vast array of dried food from mushrooms to [seahorses](#).

It is ground zero for the global [shark fin](#) trade, with about 10,000 tonnes of dried fins imported every year, according to [environmental group](#) WWF. That's around half the world's total fin harvest.

"For some people in the older generation like me, we depend on selling shark fins as our source of income," Kwong said. His fins come mainly from Spain and South America, but he will happily buy from anywhere, he said.

Businessmen like Kwong and his neighbours on Des Voeux Road were shocked last week when the luxury Peninsula Hotels chain, owned by Asia's oldest hotel company, announced it was dropping shark fin from its menu as of January.

Hongkong and Shanghai Hotels Ltd., Peninsula's parent, said the decision was made "in recognition of the threat facing the global shark population and in line with the company's sustainability vision".

Conservationists applauded the move as a breakthrough in their long battle to get Asian consumers to "just say no" to shark fin soup. But some of those in the fin business were apoplectic.

"It's not cruel at all killing sharks. There are so many sharks out there and if you don't kill them, they will kill you," said a Des Voeux Road fin seller who gave his name only as Chan.

On the other hand, Wong Wai-man of Wing Hang Marine Products Ltd. acknowledged that times were changing and younger generations were more environmentally conscious about what they ate than older Hong Kong people.

"Some people say shark fins are absolutely irreplaceable. But what happens when sharks one day become extinct or are illegal to catch? At the end of the day, we need alternatives," he said, suggesting birds' nests as a substitute.

WWF-Hong Kong says the consumption of shark fins, which has grown as China's people have become more affluent, is a driving factor behind the threat to shark populations around the world.

More than 180 species were considered threatened in 2010 compared with only 15 in 1996. About 73 million of the ancient predators, deemed essential to healthy marine ecosystems, are killed every year.

An individual serving of shark fin soup includes about 30 grams (one ounce) of fin, and a 12-person bowl sells for HK\$1,080 (about \$140). A kilogram (two pounds) of premium dried fin can fetch up to HK\$10,000 in Hong Kong.

On Des Voeux Road, giant dried shark fins are shop-window attractions, the bigger the better to draw in customers.

Other major hotels in Hong Kong said they were reviewing their shark fin policies in the wake of the Peninsula's move, but few appeared ready to drop it from their menu entirely.

Four Seasons Hotel spokeswoman Claire Blackshaw said that shark fin had been removed from the menu but was still available on request. "We are a popular venue for weddings so it gets requested quite a lot," she said.

The Conrad, part of the Hilton group, the Nikko and Regal Hongkong hotels have similar policies, with some offering a choice of menus with and without shark fin dishes.

The Peninsula's announcement coincided with a move from the European Commission to insist that all vessels fishing in EU waters, and EU vessels fishing elsewhere, land sharks with the fins still attached.

"We want to eradicate the horrendous practice of shark finning and protect sharks much better," said Europe's fisheries commissioner Maria Damanaki, referring to the common practice of cutting the fins off living sharks.

Activists said a ban on finning would reduce the shark catch because fishing vessels would not be able to store as many fins in their freezers.

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