

## Questions and Answers

### What is shark finning?

The word “finning” refers to the act of cutting off a shark’s fins and throwing the rest of the shark back into the sea. In many cases, the shark is still living when this occurs. The vast majority of finned sharks bleed to death, or become prey for other sharks, but there have been some recorded incidents in the US of “sport” fishermen catching live sharks that have somehow managed to survive being finned. However, such macabre incidents are rare.

A shark cannot be “finned” at port, as the term includes the act of throwing the body back into the sea.

### How many sharks are finned each year?

Naturally, finning is not an activity that captains and crews are keen to report, so there are no official figures on shark finning. However, taking into the account the wide discrepancy between the number of sharks reported as caught and the recorded imports of shark fins into east Asia, the World Conservation Union (IUCN) has estimated that tens of millions of sharks are finned every year.

### Is shark finning banned in the U.S. and the EU?

Shark finning was banned by an Act of Congress in 2000. Under the act, fins may be separated from carcasses at sea, but when landed the fins must weigh no more than 5% of the “dressed” weight of the shark - that is, the carcass without its head or guts. This rule applies to all US-registered vessels. Foreign vessels may not fin sharks within the US Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), may not land fins or carcasses in the US without the corresponding carcasses (and within the 5% weight limit) and may not trans-ship fins at sea within the US EEZ.

The EU has also enacted shark finning regulations, but with one significant difference: fins landed separately from carcasses must weigh no more than 5% of the *whole* weight of the shark. Because a shark’s head and, in particular, its liver, are very heavy in relation to the rest of its body, this difference is very important. It means that boat crews can fin many more sharks while still being able to conform to the 5% rule.

To date, four regional fisheries management organizations (RFMOs)<sup>1</sup> covering large areas of the world’s oceans, have issued recommendations against shark finning. While these are not legally binding, they serve to focus the minds of their individual member nations on the need for legally-binding domestic finning regulations.

### Why is finning harmful?

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<sup>1</sup> The Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission, International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas, Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organization and Indian Ocean Tuna Commission have nearly identical recommendations regarding shark finning at sea. Under these rules, sharks may be finned at sea but fins must adhere to the 5% rule, at least at the first point at which they are unloaded. However, the recommendations do not make clear whether the weight ratio is based on dressed or whole sharks.

Firstly, it means that fishing vessels can catch more sharks than they otherwise would, thus imperilling shark species even more. If crews are not required to keep and freeze shark carcasses, they can continue catching and finning sharks long after their freezers are full, whether they're full of sharks or of high-value species such as tuna. All they need is deck-space, sun and air to dry the fins. This means that sharks can be caught in totally unsustainable volumes.

Secondly, because they are at – or near – the top of the food chain, the disappearance of sharks is likely to have devastating consequences for other fish species in the chain. Predictive modelling has shown that other fish, even those that are the normal prey of sharks, could experience total population crashes. The fishing industry would do well to recognise this, since many of the population crashes could be of very important commercial species.

Finally, there are millions of people in the developing world for whom sharks are an important source of protein. Poor coastal communities, usually fishing in small wooden boats, cannot compete with the large industrial vessels that are finning sharks only a few kilometers out to sea. In the past few years, such communities – in Africa, Latin America and India – have reported precipitous declines in their shark catches. Fewer and fewer sharks are swimming into the nearshore waters where such communities can catch them: instead, they are rotting on the seabed. It is no coincidence that the first multi-lateral body to urge an end to shark finning was not a conservation body, but the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation.

### **Which sharks are most often used for the fin trade?**

Recent DNA studies of shark fins in trade show that blue sharks comprise about 17% of the total sharks used for the fin trade. Since blue sharks are the species most commonly caught by longline fisheries, and are considered one of the most biologically productive sharks, this has not generated much concern until recently. However, recent scientific reports have found that as many as 20 million blue sharks are killed annually and that the population is in decline. A Japanese study found that blue sharks had experienced a 75-86% decline from 1945 -1987 and other studies show that the catch of blue sharks since then has declined by 60% in the Northwest Atlantic.

In addition to blue sharks, DNA tests identified a number of others commonly used for shark fin soup including the hammerhead, shortfin mako, silky, sandbar, bull and thresher shark.

### **Is there an alternative to using real shark fins for shark fin soup?**

Although various alternatives have been promoted in Asia, they have not achieved widespread popularity. The main reason is that they lack the historical cachet of shark fin soup, a dish that was once the sole preserve of Emperors and that, for two thousand years, has enjoyed the reputation of symbolizing great wealth and power. The low-level acceptance of alternatives is certainly not based on a preference for the flavor of real shark fins, since they have none. Flavor is imparted to shark fin soup by the addition of chicken or fish stock.

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