

Sharks on the Shelf

How some of the world's most ancient and magnificent animals wind up in your home.

Sharks are killed for many reasons. Their largely undeserved reputation as man eaters has sparked an entire industry devoted to catching them for sport. Sharks are also targets of intensive commercial fisheries around the globe. In addition, they are the accidental bycatch of fisheries that target other large fish such as swordfish and tuna. A variety of species of ray, which are related to sharks, are also caught by commercial fisheries. Sharks caught both as bycatch and as target species wind up being sold in a variety of forms.

Shark Meat

While the meat of some sharks and rays, such as makos, dogfish and skate, is sold for human consumption, the meat of most species of sharks and rays is not eaten in the developed world. Shark meat may be sold under the name of the shark from which it came (for example, blackened mako) but it is often disguised. For example, shark meat is sometimes called "flake" and may be sold as fish and chips in restaurants. Most environmental organizations and aquaria (e.g., Monterey Bay Aquarium) advise against eating shark meat because of conservation concern for most species. But even consumers who avoid eating shark meat may be intentionally or unintentionally contributing to the wholesale killing of sharks through consumption of other, commercially valuable parts of the shark

Shark Fins

Popular in East Asia, shark fins are considered a delicacy and shark fin soup can sell for as much as \$100 per bowl. This has given rise to the particularly wasteful practice of "finning", where the shark's fins are removed and the remainder of the shark thrown back into the sea.. Frequently alive when finned, these animals die an agonizing death. It has been estimated that, around the world, tens of millions of sharks die in this way every year. Some countries, including the United States, have banned the practice.

Shark Skin

The skin of sharks and rays is made of fine scales known as denticles. Its primary use is in leather products. Shark skins are tanned in the same way as the skin of most terrestrial animals such as cows. The United States, northern Europe and Japan are major markets for shark skin. It is used in the manufacture of luxury items including boots and shoes, handbags, wallets and purses, belts, watch straps, holsters and for ornamentation. According to the United Nations, tiger, lemon, dusky, nurse, sandbar, porbeagle, shortfin mako, scalloped hammerhead and bull sharks are most often used in the manufacture of leather goods

Shark Cartilage

The skeleton of a shark is comprised of cartilage, not bone. There are unsubstantiated claims that shark cartilage has curative and/or preventative powers in a variety of minor and major ailments. It has been used for everything from acne, asthma and eczema, to life-threatening diseases such as AIDS and cancer. The cartilage is sold powdered or in capsule or tablet form. Trade in shark cartilage is widespread and poorly documented. The major producing and consuming countries are the USA, Japan, Australia and India, with growing markets in Europe and other industrialized countries. Companies in the United States market shark cartilage to over 35 other countries.

The cartilage of blue sharks is considered to be among the highest in quality because it contains larger quantities of chondroitin, but cartilage of a variety of both deep sea and coastal tropical sharks is used to manufacture products containing shark cartilage.

Shark Liver Oil

While the market for shark cartilage is fairly large in the developed world, the market for shark liver oil is far more widespread. Unlike most other fish, sharks lack a swim bladder. Instead, their large livers are saturated with oils that help provide them with buoyancy. Rich in Vitamins A and D, omega-3 fatty acids and alkylglycerols, which have immune system enhancing properties, shark liver oil also contains pristane, squalene, triglycerides, glycerol ethers, and fatty alcohols. Squalene is among the most widely used components of the oil. It is used internationally in cosmetics and as a lubricant. It is also sold as a non-proven cure for cancer, and to treat arthritis, psoriasis and other skin disorders. Although most Americans don't realize it, shark liver oil is widely used in anti-hemorrhoidal ointments. Most notably, it is used in Preparation H, which is widely used in the United States and distributed internationally. Shark liver oil is obtained from sharks living in deep, cold water. The species most often targeted for their oil include blue sharks, gulper sharks, basking sharks and tope sharks.

Other Non-food Products

Shark teeth and jaws are sold as ornaments and souvenirs, with the jaws of larger sharks, such as mako and great white, being the most marketable. Small sharks may be used for bait. By-products of shark fishing are used to manufacture food for farmed fish and shrimp; and to make "fish meal" which is used as a fertilizer or in animal feed.

Sharks Belong in the Sea

Virtually all large shark species are in steep decline as a result of poorly managed domestic and international fisheries. There are few products made from sharks for which some other ingredient cannot be substituted. Its time we started valuing the contribution that sharks make to healthy ocean ecosystems rather than simply trying to maximize their commercial value. You can show that you care about the survival of shark species by avoiding products made from sharks.

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