





INTERNATIONAL TRADE IN SHARK FINS

by

Trudie Dockerty

Prepared under the supervision of Dr. Richard Luxmoore

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Over the last few years there has been growing disquiet about the increasing numbers of sharks being fished and traded on domestic and world markets. A major buyer quoted in the New York Times (1989) said "The shark is the most utilised species of fish there is. You can sell its smile, its skin, its meat, its liver, its fins. It's a wonderful and awesome species".

The following account relates concerns arising from a reported upsurge in demand for shark products, but probably presents an over-simplification of the overall world situation, as it is based mainly on reports from the USA. A general difficulty was encountered in locating references which portray experiences in other parts of the world. There seemed to be conflicting observations in some of the literature reviewed, caused perhaps by regional differences in the abundance of sharks and in the markets for shark products. Due to these factors, it is difficult to gauge the present consensus of opinion on the shark's current global status.

Compagno (1990) has identified recently established shark fisheries of at least three types:-

1) Local, mostly by-catch fisheries of numerous developing countries (e.g., Mexico, India, Pakistan, and Indonesia);

2) Wide ranging offshore by-catch and directed fisheries of several developed countries that have invested in long-range international fishing fleets (e.g., U.S.S.R., Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan);

3) Local directed fisheries of developed countries in which the consumption of sharks has suddenly become fashionable (e.g. the United States).

The United States fishery emerged over the 1980's and has been studied by Manire and Gruber (1990). They report that an increase in demand for shark meat, coupled with the foreign demand for fins, has lead to the rebirth of an intensive shark industry, which had been dormant since the late 1930's when the demand for vitamin 'A' rich shark liver oil declined. An analysis of the total catch in the 1980's revealed that 57% was derived from commercial fisheries and 43% from sport fishing. Of the total catch only 34% was landed; 5% from commercial enterprises and 29% by sports fishermen. An astounding 66% was discarded dead, mostly as by-catch of fisheries targeted at swordfish, tuna, shrimp or squid. The by-catch element is also a feature of other fleets. 'Greenpeace Australia calculates that in 1988 alone Taiwanese and Korean fleets killed over 2.25 million blue sharks <u>Prionace glauca</u> in the north Pacific as they fished for squid.' (Dayton, 1991).

The impact of sport fishermen is also significant. As far back as 1970 a survey by the US Fish and Wildlife Service estimated that sport fishermen in that country were catching 1.715.000 sharks a year (Burgess, 1970). Peter Peck of the European Federation of Sea

Anglers (pers. com.) suggests that the economic value of the shark sport fishery can be greater than that of the commercial fishery in some areas.

Compagno (1990)describes as 'particularly worrying' fin trade, 'which targets a low-volume, international shark high-value gournet product worldwide and fits nicely as a low-risk by-catch for numerous inshore and high seas fisheries'. He suggests that as the value of fins to the oriental market continues to rise, some shark species may be pressured by trade in the same way as the elephant is for its ivory. He adds, 'The oriental shark fin fishery seems all-pervasive and may be affecting populations of large oceanic sharks worldwide. Longliners, purse seiners, and pelagic gill-netters can harvest shark fins as a highly lucrative by-catch with relatively little directed effort and storage problems. By being discarded after removal of their fins, shark carcasses do not compete for freezer space with the more valuable oceanic scombroides that are targeted by such fisheries'.

Manire and Gruber (1990) claim that the practice of 'finning', that is, cutting the valuable fins from sharks and returning the remainder of the shark to the ocean, has stimulated the shark fishery. Dayton (1991) reports that fins have fetched \$117 kg on international markets.

The wasteful. but legal practise of finning has caused public outcry. The New York Times reported 'more than 35 million pounds (approximately 16 million Kg) of shark, or three times the yearly domestic catch, are discarded from finning in the United States waters each year' (Anon, 1990). Some reports refer to animals being dumped back in the ocean alive, without fins. Dayton (1991) says that many species of shark are exploited in this way. However, in an earlier interview in the New York Times (Anon, 1989) a shark fin dealer said that fishermen were not "going to throw away 50 cents on every dollar" by discarding sharks after removing the fins, (indicating that about half of a shark's market value in the United States is in the fins - also confirmed by Ingwerson, 1989).

It appears that the relative value of the fins compared to the carcass may vary in different markets, and that the extent of the finning practice may depend on the demand for other shark products in a given locality. Also, although several writers refer to widespread finning very often the sources of such information are

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