



## Shark Fin Indigestion

When it comes to conservation, there is no limit to what campaigners are willing to claim. Worse, there seems to be no limit to what some people are willing to believe. Let's consider sharks.

NGOs claim that we have been killing 100 million sharks for each of the last twenty years or so, most of it supposedly to supply the taste for shark fin soup in Asia, mainly China. But you really don't need to be a marine biologist to realize that this is nonsense. If it were true, we would have killed at least 2 billion sharks over this period. This equates to 190 sharks per minute or 3 sharks for each second of the year. This purported rate of killing is inconsistent with what we know about the relatively low level of reproduction of sharks. Nevertheless, I remember attending a meeting in the late nineties, in the Tampa Bay area, convened by the International (sic) Shark Attacks Files. I asked one of their scientists how they came out with this figure of 100 million sharks a year. "Easy", he said, "a few calculations of landings and you can extrapolate. For some 10 years now, we have monitored the situation. And you know what: 100 million is most likely on the low side." He talked to me with a certain haughtiness, as if he was addressing an heretic who was simply too dumb to see the light.

Playing our own extrapolation game can produce some interesting statistics. If the average shark produces 20 kilos of shark fins (the figure is most likely closer to 30 kilos but let's be conservative), annual production is 2 billion kilos per year. A kilo produces between 60 and 100 bowls of soup depending on the quality. Let's use 70 as a conservative figure. This translates to 140 billion bowls of soup every year. If 500 million Chinese have access to such an expensive delicacy (surely the figure is much lower), they are each consuming on average 280 bowls of soup a year, for which privilege they will pay some US\$28,000, at the lowest possible quoted price.

Projecting these figures over the period of twenty years, the total cost of all this soup would be a modest \$280,000,000,000,000 – \$280 trillion US dollars. Anyone can see that this is not a realistic claim. As good as shark fin soup may be, the market for it is simply not this big. Unfortunately, I have to terminate my projection here because my electronic calculator does not provide for calculations in the quadrillions.

So here are the real conclusions that can be drawn:

1. The 100 million per year figure is wrong and exaggerated. It is so unreliable that it has no conservation use. The fact that it is meaningless might be thought to undermine the supposed authority of the campaigners with the media, but it seems

that their credibility is not a topic for consideration. NGO omniscience on fish populations is not to be questioned.

2. The exact numbers of sharks in the world are not known. Accurate figures are difficult to produce. Catch data suggests that in general shark populations are abundant. Of course, this is the exact opposite of the conclusion that the campaigners wish people – and gullible journalists – to draw.
3. Shark fishing is sustainable. Whatever moral conclusions may be drawn from the practice of shark finning (which is much less prevalent today than it was, say, twenty years ago), shark fisheries does not appear to be having a significant negative impact on shark populations.

As can be seen, we have no reason not to believe scientists or campaigners who assert that 100 million sharks are being caught each year. At the very least, 280 bowls of shark fin soup every year would have the capacity to cause widespread indigestion in Asia. This is perhaps the most apt impression, given the verbal (or statistical) diarrhoea that we are asked to believe.

Finally, if ever a shark “scientist” tells you that my figures are not reliable and/or credible, just answer that I have just extrapolated from their own \*\*\*\*.

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