

From apathy to multi-stakeholder action for our biodiversity

By Eugene K B Tan

In recent years, the consumption of shark fin in Singapore has declined. A World Wide Fund for Nature (Singapore) study last year found that 82 per cent of Singaporean respondents had not consumed shark fin for at least a year.

This would have been unimaginable even as recently as a decade ago. After all, this was a must-have delicacy at wedding and corporate banquets. But more and more bridal couples, companies, and diners are making the conscious choice of not having shark fin soup on their banquet menus.

The reduction in the consumption of shark fin in Singapore is the effect of a conscious change in dietary choice as a result of successful "say no to shark fin" campaigns. Their relative success demonstrates what the power of individual action combined with activist zeal and public education can do. It also speaks volumes of how nudges, driven primarily by civil society, public education, and personal action, contribute to the consumption of the delicacy being frowned upon.

To be sure, there remains much more that we can do. A recent report found that Singapore remains a significant trader in shark fin. Singapore was the third largest importer of shark fin (14,134 tonnes), after Hong Kong (83,210 tonnes) and Malaysia (53,894 tonnes), between 2005 and 2013. In that same period, Singapore exported 11,535 tonnes of shark fin.

Our daily actions and choices are necessary to ensure the well-being of the biodiversity around

us. However, the driving motivation cannot be about animal rights since the proposition that animals have rights remains far-fetched, if not ludicrous, to some. Neither should it be about food ethics – "I don't consume shark fin soup because it is cruel" – as this would not appeal to non-vegetarians.

For public campaigns to be successful, they need to connect cognitively and affectively with the audience. The target audience of the "say no to shark fin" campaigns is the young, who can be powerful change agents. Such campaigns have sought to be fun, trendy, yet infused with scientific-based evidence projecting a pragmatic, even calm message to secure buy-in. They are not moralistic or judgmental, and certainly not angry or fanatical.

Ultimately, any successful campaign has to bear the hallmarks of education, awareness, and empowerment. These lend weight to the centrality and advocacy of personal choice as part of an informed and responsible consumerism.

As the oceans' apex predator, the role of sharks in maintaining a healthy ecosystem cannot be underestimated. Should the sharks' population decline precipitously, the marine ecosystem will be severely impacted. It is estimated that at least 70 million sharks are killed annually for the global shark fin industry.

But shark conservation campaign is not about sharks alone but about sustainability, oceanic health, and robust commercial fisheries. It's also about enlightened self-interest at its core. As a major food source, the oceans are critical to our food supply and security. As a maritime nation, commercial fisheries are important to us as well.

Much more can and needs to be done to reduce the consumption and, particularly, the sale and trade of shark fin in Singapore. For a start, the government, grassroots organisations, and corporate entities should publicly commit to a ban on shark fin soup. Government banqueting bans on shark fin are found in China, Hong Kong, and Malaysia. Brunei has a shark fin trade ban.

There should be more robust regulation of international trade in wildlife in Singapore. The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) has ranked Singapore as one of the world's top 10 illegal wildlife smuggling hubs for endangered wildlife species and by-products.

ELEVATED RISK OF EXTINCTION

In the medium-term, there should also be serious consideration of a moratorium on shark fin trade and, eventually, a ban. While trade in shark fin is neither illegal nor in breach of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), the long-term survival of more shark species is increasingly threatened primarily through shark fin consumption.

According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species, a quarter of sharks and their relatives are facing an alarmingly elevated risk of extinction. This is compounded by the fact that a large part of the shark fin trade remains unregulated, unreported, and underground.

In September 2014, for the first time, CITES listed several shark species of great commercial

value and traded for in high volumes in its Appendix II listing. This listing highlights the importance of risk management and preventive action and requires CITES contracting parties, such as Singapore, to ensure that trade in a listed species is strictly regulated for legality, sustainability, and traceability. This reduces the over-harvesting of highly traded flora and fauna and can help protect biodiversity.

Singapore does not yet have species-specific product trade codes for all shark species. More robust monitoring of trade in shark and their parts can result in better and more accurate information of the import and export of shark fin in Singapore. This can reduce illegal and unsustainable trade going undetected.

Although CITES has not called for a ban in international trade of sharks and their parts, the precautionary principle, simply put, urges the taking of protective action before there is complete scientific proof of a risk. The cascading effect of a rapid decline or extinction of shark species, as the ocean apex predators, cannot be trivialised or taken for granted.

Renowned primatologist Dame Jane Goodall once said: "The greatest danger to our future is apathy". Apathy can be overwhelmed by the power of grassroots and regulatory action to make a positive difference. Given the interconnectedness of humans, wildlife and the environment, this is where a multi-stakeholder approach and tougher regulation can make that crucial difference.

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