

Consumption of shark fin here has come down,  
but more can be done for the ocean's apex predator

# Vital to preserve marine ecosystem

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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 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) and Malaysia (33,894), 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 ocean's 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.

But the shark conservation campaign is not about sharks alone but about sustainability, oceanic health and robust commercial fisheries.

Much more can and needs to be done to reduce the consumption and, particularly, the sale of and trade in shark fin in Singapore. For a start, the government, grassroots organisations and corporate entities should publicly commit to a banqueting ban on shark fin soup.

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, 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 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.

Singapore does not yet have species-specific product trade codes for all shark species. More robust monitoring of trade in sharks 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.

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 inter-connectedness 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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