

Saving sharks by nudging change – Eugene KB Tan

Yesterday, the Singaporean parliament passed the Animals and Birds (Amendment) Bill, which seeks to enhance the welfare and responsible care of animals.

PUBLISHED ON 6 NOVEMBER 2014

The welcomed legislative amendments are important even if they do not signal the arrival of animal rights in Singapore. Our treatment of non-human beings, which share the same space we do, speaks equally to what we are as a society as well as our sense of well-being and responsibility to creatures unable to protect themselves.

Consider the silent, unfolding phenomenon of the declining popularity of shark's fin soup in Singapore. This was unimaginable even five years ago. After all, it is a status symbol delicacy at wedding and corporate banquets. More bridal couples and companies, however, are turning their backs on having shark's fin soup on their menus.

In this regard, the various "Say No to Shark Fin" campaigns by different groups and individuals are instructive. This mindset shift enabling the change of embedded cultural and dietary habits speaks volumes of how the broad campaign is slowly but surely contributing to the delicacy's declining popularity.

The campaign's motivation has not been animal rights per se, 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 eat shark's fin soup because it is cruel") as this has limited appeal to non-vegetarians.

Why conservation campaign works

As the oceans' apex predator, the role of sharks in maintaining a healthy ecosystem is central. It is estimated that at least 70 million sharks are killed annually for the global shark's fin industry. Should the shark population decline precipitously, it would have a severely impact on the marine ecosystem, affecting our food supply and security.

Awareness and understanding are crucial precursors to sustainable action and purposeful behavioural change. For public campaigns to be successful, they also need to connect cognitively and affectively with the audience.

Recognising that young people can be powerful change agents, the campaigns have sought to be fun and trendy, yet infused with scientific-based evidence projecting a pragmatic, even calm message that lends itself to a viral spread.

As shark's fin consumption remains contested, the campaigns are not moralistic or judgmental. One need not be a lover of sharks or a vegetarian to support them. Fundamentally, it is about recognising that the well-being of the shark population and oceans is intimately connected with ours.

At its core, it is enlightened self-interest. Ultimately, any successful campaign must emphasise – without being intrusive – personal choice as being integral to an informed and responsible consumerism.

Publication: The Malaysian Insider

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The largely grassroots-initiated shark conservation campaign has succeeded in getting tastemakers, opinion shapers, media celebrities and personalities to pledge support and champion the cause despite different personal motivations. It is the broad umbrella the campaign provides that enables people of different persuasions to sign on.

More than ever, civil society needs to collaborate with like-minded civil society organisations, governments and corporate entities to harness the ripple effect. For instance, the “I’m FINished with FINS” campaign has partners such as the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), Earth Hour and National Geographic, and has secured corporate shark’s fin-free pledges from numerous hotel groups and businesses. This provides the campaign with visibility and a multiplier effect in terms of outreach and impact.

Saving sharks from extinction

Promoting a “think global, act local” outlook, the shark conservation outreach has a visible presence in major shark’s fin trade and consumption hubs, including Malaysia, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau and China (Shanghai, Beijing).

Collectively, the various campaigns have helped to drastically reduce sale, trade and consumption in key hot spots. Governments in China, Hong Kong and Malaysia have introduced government banqueting bans. China, the world’s largest consumer of shark’s fin, has halved its consumption since 2011. Similar figures are reported for Hong Kong, the largest shark’s fin trade hub and the highest per capita consumer of shark’s fin.

Singapore, the second-largest shark’s fin trade hub and second-highest per capita consumer, trails with a commendable 33% decline in consumption since 2011. More can be done. For a start, the government, grassroots organisations and government-linked entities should publicly commit to a banqueting ban on shark’s fin soup. In the medium term, serious consideration should be given to a moratorium, and eventually a ban, on the shark’s fin trade.

While most trade in shark’s fin is neither illegal nor in breach of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), its consumption threatens the long-term survival of various shark species.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature’s (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species states that a quarter of sharks and their relatives are facing an alarmingly elevated risk of extinction. More worryingly, a large part of the shark’s fin trade remains unregulated, unreported and underground.

In September 2014, CITES listed in its Appendix II, for the first time, shark species of great commercial value and traded for in high volumes. A CITES Appendix II listing requires convention parties, such as Singapore, to ensure that trade in listed species is strictly regulated to ensure its legality, sustainability and traceability.

Both the IUCN Red List and CITES listing reflect the precautionary principle at work in protecting our delicate biodiversity. The precautionary principle, simply put, urges protective action even where there is a lack of complete scientific proof of a risk. The cascading effect of a rapid decline or extinction of shark species, as the ocean’s apex predators, cannot be trivialised.

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We need to go beyond mere co-existence with the animal world. Given the intimate interconnectedness of humans, wildlife and the environment, a multi-stakeholder approach is needed to make that crucial difference.

But it also starts with you and me taking the first step and making a difference with our daily actions and choices. – Todayonline, November 6, 2014.

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* This is the personal opinion of the writer or publication and does not necessarily represent the views of The Malaysian Insider.