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PRETOMA

A Struggle to Stop Shark Finning, One Campaign at a Time

By Jeannine Clark (with additional reporting by Erin Caslavka)

“Shark finning is not only cruel, it is irresponsible and unsustainable fishing at its highest degree. In spite of this, it has been close to impossible to attain any international binding management and conservation measures to curtail this practice.” - Randall Arauz, PRETOMA Founder



It's hard to have sympathy for sharks, especially when you remember that menacing music and those terrifying scenes from the movie *Jaws*. I can almost hear that creepy *Da na, da na, da na...* as I envision a single silver fin cutting through the surface of the ocean while some unsuspecting swimmer bobbed in the still water only seconds away from a vicious attack.

For decades people were terrified to go into the water when they heard a Great White was spotted anywhere near the shore. Swimmers and surfers steered clear for fear of being hunted down and bitten (or even worse, killed) by that cold-blooded predator. But did you know you're more likely to be killed by a vending machine falling on you than by a shark? In fact, sharks only eat when they're hungry and humans are not their preferred food source.

Contrary to popular belief, it's the shark that is the vulnerable prey and we humans who are the aggressive hunters. Unfortunately for them, in certain Asian cultures the fins of a shark are considered a delicacy and are in high demand for use in Chinese shark fin soup - a dish that became popular during the Ming Dynasty. As a result, sharks are being killed in record numbers off the coasts of South America and Asia due to “shark finning”: the removal and harvesting of shark fins. After hauling a live shark onto a fishing boat, the valuable fins are brutally severed and the sharks' amputated, live bodies are then dumped back into the sea so the fishermen only have to transport the fins back to land. Owing to the fact that this commodity can command up to \$200/lb., shark finning is widespread and largely



unmanaged and unmonitored.

Concerned as to what's being done to address the issue, I consulted Christina Slager, Marine Biologist and Director of Husbandry at the Aquarium of the Bay in San Francisco. Recently, the Aquarium of the Bay presented an informative and interactive exhibit titled: "Finning Isn't Funny," that allowed visitors to watch a 2-minute film shot aboard a fishing vessel. Ms. Slager warned me that the film is



quite graphic in its depiction of the cruelty involved in shark finning, but insists, "The more awareness we have through education, the more people can develop an appreciation for marine life and become involved in conservation efforts." It is true: once you've seen the brutality that occurs onboard these fishing boats, it's hard to look at sharks with the same sense of menace as before.

The short film was produced by PRETOMA, a Costa Rican non-profit that focuses on marine conservation and research. The impetus behind the formation of the NGO (founded in 1996) was the simple fact that marine conservation seemed to fall a distant second to land conservation within Costa Rica, a Central American country that's noted for its sense of environmental concern.

PRETOMA reports that when they got started, the laws and regulations that existed in Costa Rica were primarily on paper and largely went unenforced. As a result, they directed their efforts in the following categories: field conservation projects, research and outreach onboard commercial fishing vessels, public awareness and education, and litigation and policy advocacy. Over the years, the majority of PRETOMA's success has been in public campaigns, gathering thousands of signatures on petitions urging governmental bans on the practice of shark finning. Additionally, PRETOMA collects and publishes data on sharks (as well as sea turtles) that include satellite tagging studies on the capture of these species by long-line and shrimp-fishing fleets.

Randall Arauz, a marine biologist and the founder of PRETOMA, was recently recognized for his work when he received The Goldman Environmental Prize in April 2010. "When I started PRETOMA over 14 years ago," Arauz noted in his acceptance speech, "I had no idea WE were going to go so far! And I say 'we' because over the years a team of dedicated conservationists has performed the most diverse of tasks to fulfill our mission - which is to protect, and restore, endangered marine wildlife. Global shark population declines are estimated at 90%, mostly due to shark finning. Governments are drafting 'Shark Action Plans' in an effort to reverse the negative trend on shark populations, but NOTHING has been done yet to actually curtail shark mortality."



Shark specialists estimate that annually an astounding *38 to 100 million sharks* are killed for their fins (thousands of which can be killed in a single haul), making this a billion-dollar industry. The irony is that after surviving 300 million years undisturbed, sharks are now an endangered species. With only 3,500 Great White sharks left in the wild, they are the #1 endangered shark species – even more endangered than tigers. According to the National Marine Fisheries Service estimates, it could take up to 400 years to rebuild shark population numbers.

Arauz, like many of us, quite simply had no idea that the practice even existed until he sent a video camera along with a friend of his who'd gotten a job as a cook on a long-line fishing boat. (Originally, his goal was to see how long-line fishing was negatively impacting sea turtles who were being trapped as an "accepted casualty.") According to The Goldman Environmental Prize website, "The footage he received completely shocked him. Seeing the brutal practice in full color sparked his subsequent commitment to stop shark finning in Costa Rica.

"In 2003, Arauz exposed a Taiwanese ship illegally landing 30 tons of shark fins, amounting to the death of 30,000 sharks. Outrage from the Costa Rican public and international community galvanized support for Arauz's ensuing campaign to enforce the country's existing laws against shark finning." As a result, Costa Rica has specifically banned shark finning, and mandates that all sharks must be landed (brought in on a boat) with their fins attached. Laws also call for fines and jail terms for those caught landing shark fins at Costa Rican ports.

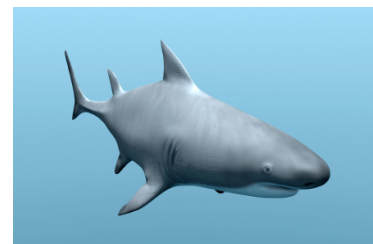


Unfortunately, as China has emerged as a global leader in the world economy, more and more Chinese are calling for the importation of shark fins to be used in shark fin soup. Vessels from Taiwan, China and Indonesia set out to harvest the fins and bring them back to Hong Kong, where the majority of the trade in fins takes place.

To combat the continued shark fin harvests, PRETOMA has ongoing outreach programs with the commercial fishery sector to introduce practices and devices that can at least mitigate impacts on non-target species. They also conduct year-round public awareness marine conservation campaigns as well as education programs in schools, high schools and universities in an effort to end the demand for the fins. PRETOMA conservationists also work directly with the Ministry of Environment and the Costa Rican Congress, and file lawsuits against government agencies when their policies promote unsustainable exploitation of marine resources.

Sharks play a vital role in the food web ("food chain" is now a retired term) as both predators and scavengers. As Arauz himself observes, "A healthy ocean needs a healthy shark population." So when one piece of that eco-puzzle is threatened, it affects the entire ecosystem. At such a huge rate of depletion, humans are gravely disrupting the fragile balance in the marine ecosystem. Scientists warn that because sharks are slow reproducing animals, we are in danger of an entire population loss. So ultimately, the "jaws" of life for the shark remain with us.

You can support PRETOMA in many ways, through volunteerism, donation, adopting a shark, and by signing petitions that support various campaigns focused on change.



*To find out how you can help put an end to this cruel practice, go to:
www.pretoma.org/sharks*

For information on the Aquarium of the Bay in San Francisco, CA visit:

www.aquariumofthebay.org

To read about the 2010 recipients of The Goldman Award, go to:

www.goldmanprize.org/recipients/current

To sign a petition to stop the practice of shark finning at: http://www.change.org/petitions/view/put_an_end_to_brutal_shark_finning

Photo credits: iStockphoto.com; PRETOMA; Aquarium of the Bay, San Francisco

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