

Directions:

1. Mark your confusion.
2. Show evidence of a close reading. Mark up the text with questions and/or comments.
3. Write a one-page reflection on your own sheet of paper.

Making Headway in the Movement to Protect the World's Sharks

Source: Elisabeth Rosenthal /*New York Times*/ September 10, 2011

For sharks, life at the top of the ocean food chain is becoming safer — at least from human predators.

The last 12 months have seen a flurry of laws, regulations and industry actions to end the international trade in the age-old delicacy, including bans on shark fin sales in Hawaii, Oregon, Washington and parts of Canada.

Last week, the California Senate also voted to ban the sale or possession of shark fins — a billion-dollar global trade that has led to the brutal deaths of tens of millions of sharks a year and resulted in many open-ocean shark species being threatened with extinction. The Bahamas and Honduras have prohibited shark fishing in the last two years.

“We’re really enthusiastic to see good things finally starting to happen for sharks,” said Elizabeth Wilson, a marine wildlife expert at Oceana, a nonprofit conservation group that has long campaigned against the trade.

Shark fins are used to make a coveted Chinese banquet soup that can sell for over \$100 a bowl. It has the ceremonial mystique of benefiting health and virility, and serving it to guests is considered to be a sign of great honor and respect.

In an increasingly prosperous Asia, the market for the soup has grown drastically, causing overfishing around the globe. The presence of the once-common hammerhead in large parts of the western Atlantic, for example, has decreased by up to 89 percent over the last 25 years.

The spate of new protections is a result of efforts by environmental groups to reduce market demand for shark fins, because international treaties have failed to adequately curb shark fishing.

The Food Network recently removed all shark recipes from its offerings, and the celebrity chef Gordon Ramsay has been pressing Chinese restaurants in London to renounce the soup this year.

Even in Asia, where shark fins and soup are ubiquitous, campaigns to end shark fin dining by celebrities like the basketball star Yao Ming of China and the conservation group WildAid have had effects. Sales have been reduced by about one-third in Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan, experts say, though consumption is still growing on the Chinese mainland. Ali Baba, a kind of Chinese eBay, no longer accepts shark fin transactions.

“This has been a slow-boil campaign because the traditional methods failed,” said Peter Knights, executive director of WildAid, which worked with Mr. Yao. “We went to consumers because it was a crisis and nothing else was dealing with it.”

Mr. Knights pointed out that the United Nations Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, which restricts trade on items derived from endangered or threatened species, denied protection to five shark species last year after nations that profit from the trade voted against it.

Shark populations cannot tolerate intensive fishing because sharks have few offspring and often do not reproduce until they are over 10 years old. Even by conservative estimates, more than 10 million shark fins moved through Hong Kong in 2008, the main distribution center for the trade. Fins sell for over \$300 a pound.

Many marine biologists support tougher regulation of shark fishing itself.

“These bans go part way, but you’re still allowed to fish sharks without a permit,” said John Bruno, a marine ecologist at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. “In North Carolina, there are shark derbies for fun, where they are hung by their tails. We think it’s O.K. to do that with this ocean predator, but we wouldn’t dream of doing it to a terrestrial animal like a bear.”

As a halfway measure to limit the fin trade, a growing number of countries, including the United States as of last December, prohibit the removal of shark fins at sea. Requiring fishing boats to take whole sharks to the dock limits the size of their catch and allows the authorities to inspect for endangered species. In the traditional shark fin trade, fishermen slice off the valued fins from a living shark and dump the still writhing body back in the water.

But shark-finning prohibitions are hard to enforce because they involve dockside inspections of numerous small boats and a sack of lucrative fins is easily hidden. When Dr. Bruno was at his university’s new research station in the Galápagos Islands of Ecuador this summer, he was summoned by local authorities to help identify sharks on a boat they had seized with more than 350 carcasses, fins already partly detached. Ecuadorean law also bans finning at sea.

“This was in the Galápagos, a national marine reserve and national heritage site,” Dr. Bruno said. “If it’s even happening there, that shows you the size of the problem.”

The California ban, which has passed both chambers and now goes to Gov. Jerry Brown, would have a major impact on the availability of shark fins in the United States because most are imported from Hong Kong via California. The legislation bans imports as of Jan. 1, 2012, but allows those who possess shark fins to dispose of their stocks until June 30, 2013.

Though one of the bill’s sponsors is Paul Fong, a Chinese-born assemblyman from Sunnyvale, some Asian-Americans in the state have objected that the measure is discriminatory, singling out an important cultural tradition. But some surveys have shown that 70 percent of Asian-Americans in California support the bill.

Decreasing demand from the United States and Hong Kong may not offer enough of a respite for threatened shark populations if the popularity of shark fin soup continues to grow on the Chinese mainland.

In a commercial made by WildAid, Asian diners at a fancy restaurant begin pushing away their soup bowls as a shark in a nearby tank bleeds from the site where his fin was removed. “Remember,” says Mr. Yao, the retired basketball player, “when the buying stops, the killing can, too.”

Mr. Knights, of WildAid, said that if the decimation of shark populations continued, all the money in the world would not provide shark fins for diners. “This is unsustainable,” he said, “and the question is, do you end it now or do you wait until there are no sharks left?”

Reflection ideas:

- Is the ban on killing sharks a good idea or not? Why? Why not?
- Explore what other steps might be done to protect sharks
- What would happen if all sharks became extinct?