



Featured in

The New York Times (p.19)

Posted on

21 JUNE 2010

Slow gains in fight over shark's fin



Bettina Wassener

GREEN

HONG KONG When Christine and Constant Tang, both avid scuba divers, got married in 2003, they did something unusual: They did not serve shark's fin soup at their wedding reception in Hong Kong.

"The waiter who took our banquet order gave us a pretty strange look, and my father-in-law had to explain in his welcoming speech that we felt strongly about being environmental, and that we were not just being cheap," Mrs. Tang said.

This may sound a bit strange and arcane to anyone unfamiliar with Chinese culture. Unluckily for sharks, the soup brewed from their fins is considered a must-have at Chinese wedding banquets and corporate dinners. For the Chinese, the delicacy is a matter of wealth, pride and prestige.

But the question of whether to eat shark's fin soup has finally begun to gain traction with the Hong Kong public, spawning Internet discussion and campaign groups. The debate here could well influence the survival of numerous shark species.

And it puts the spotlight on the evolving environmental attitudes of the world's most populous nation: China. China's huge economy is booming. So what Chinese consumers buy and eat matters — on a global scale.

Researchers estimate that 100 million sharks are killed each year, some 73 million of them for the lucrative trade in shark fins. As demand, mainly from China, has soared, many shark populations have plummeted by as much as 90 percent in recent decades.

"If sharks continue to be overfished at the current rate, it's only a matter of

a few years before the targeted species are extinct," according to Richard Thomas, communications director at Traffic, which monitors wildlife trade.

The fins are not cheap. Retailers in Hong Kong charge more than 2,000 Hong Kong dollars, or \$260, per "catty," a traditional weight measure commonly used in markets here and equal to a bit more than 600 grams, or 21 ounces. One catty makes about 10 portions of shark's fin soup.

The soup is losing some of its status — slowly.

Several vendors of dried seafood in the bustling Hong Kong neighborhood of Sheung Wan said last week that they now sold significantly less than they had a few years ago.

"People are a lot more aware about protecting the environment," said an employee at one of the dozens of stores in the area. Like others, he declined to give his name, because he was worried about the mounting bad publicity surrounding shark fins here. "There is less demand now," he said.

Hong Kong now has several groups that are opposed to shark finning — the practice of capturing sharks, removing the fins and then throwing them back into the water to die. In May, 12 restaurants and hotels pledged to offer shark-free options for banquets. Alibaba, the Chinese answer to eBay, has banned the sale of the fins on its site.

"Awareness has been rising for the past few years, but it really took off this year," said Andy Cornish at the WWF in Hong Kong.

A proliferation of videos on YouTube — like one of a whale shark that washed up in the Philippines this year, still alive but with its fins cut off — has really pushed the issue mainstream. And it hammered home how the precious fins are harvested.

Sharks are fished in oceans around the world, but Hong Kong is the hub for the trade in their fins, handling between 50 percent and 80 percent of the global market. The fins go on to mainland China or to Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and Taiwan. Hong Kong itself is also a major consumer.

Because Hong Kong is generally a trendsetter for upmarket spending in China, attitudes here could well influence consumption in the vastly greater mainland market, experts believe.

But conservationists have also taken their message to the mainland itself. Most prominent is a campaign by

WildAid featuring Yao Ming, the National Basketball Association star, who was born in Shanghai. The campaign appears on CCTV, the main state television broadcaster, and on billboards and public screens in major cities.

"Many people in China are simply not aware that shark finning is wasteful, cruel and unsustainable," said Michael Skoletsky, executive director at Shark Savers in New York, which also supports the campaign.

But changing attitudes is an uphill struggle.



Dried sharks' fins in a store in the Sheung Wan area of Hong Kong. The city is the hub for the trade in shark fins, handling between 50 percent and 80 percent of the global market.

shark-free options for banquets.

Only about 5 percent of couples choose shark-free menus at their weddings, according to a survey by a wedding industry group last year.

Elsewhere, too, shark protection is proving tough.

Last month, Hawaii became the first U.S. state to outlaw shark fins. But, Mr. Skoletsky at Shark Savers said that with all the other issues legislators have to deal with — from unemployment to oil spills — it will be "very hard to get it on the agenda" of other states.

Fergus Fung, founder of WOM, a Hong Kong restaurant guide, said, "Ultimately, we'll see shark's fin consumption phasing off here. But we're still a long way away from sharks' disappearing completely from menus. It's still a very, very big dish."

Andrea Deng contributed reporting.

ONLINE: THE GREEN BLOG
Tom Zeller Jr. and James Kanter report regularly on energy, the environment and the bottom line. green.blogs.nytimes.com

states.

Fergus Fung, founder of WOM, a Hong Kong restaurant guide, said, "Ultimately, we'll see shark's fin consumption phasing off here. But we're still a long way away from sharks' disappearing completely from menus. It's still a very, very big dish."

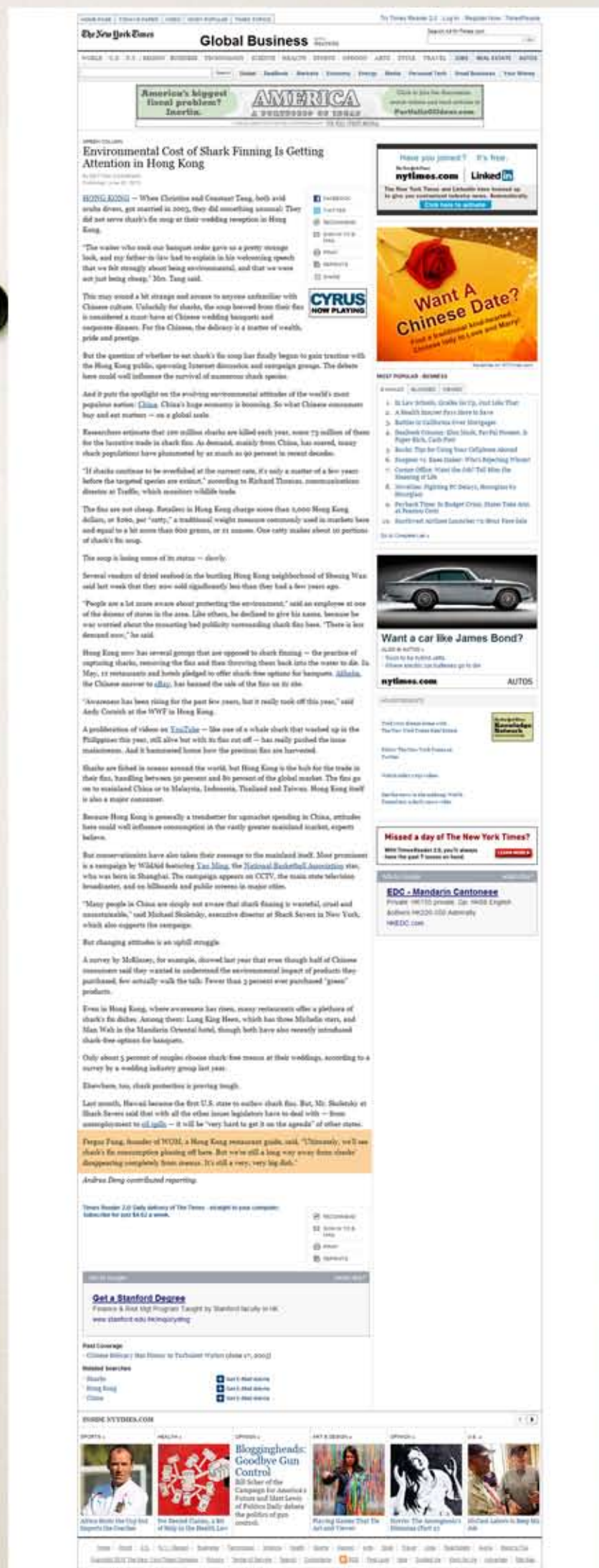


Featured in

The New York Times (Website: Green Column)

Posted on

21 JUNE 2010



Fergus Fung, founder of WOM, a Hong Kong restaurant guide, said, "Ultimately, we'll see shark's fin consumption phasing off here. But we're still a long way away from sharks' disappearing completely from menus. It's still a very, very big dish."