

Saving the Great White Monster

By Lauren Tarshis



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The great white shark is among the most feared animals in the world. But it's also one of the most important to our oceans. **Here's why this shark needs your love.**

Imagine for a few minutes that you are the most feared creature in the ocean: the great white shark. Wherever you go, you spread terror and panic. Fish scatter like confetti. Dolphins skitter away. Even six-ton killer whales aren't safe around you.

And no wonder. There is no animal in the sea that you cannot kill. Mainly you attack by surprise, striking from below, speeding toward

your prey like an underwater missile. You hit with the full force of your 4,000-pound body, knocking your prey senseless.

And then—*chomp!*

Your jaw is one of nature's most devastating weapons, with more than 300 teeth lined up in jagged rows. Your bite is three times as strong as that of a lion; one snap of your mighty jaws can kill a creature many times your size.



By Staff of the Philadelphia Inquirer

News stories about shark attacks and movies like *Jaws* have given the great white shark a reputation as a monstrous killer. In fact, shark attacks are rare.

But you are not just a killing machine, mindlessly prowling the ocean in search of your next meal. You are a highly intelligent fish, with a curious nature. You can travel more than 10,000 miles in a year. You have seen the rainbow-hued coral reefs off Australia and the volcanic shores of the Hawaiian Islands. You and others of your species know the pitch-dark depths of the Pacific and the white sandbars of the Atlantic. You are also vital to the world's oceans. As the animal at the top of the food

chain—the **apex** predator—you keep the delicate ocean **ecosystem** in balance.

For millions of years, sharks like you have thrived, with nothing to fear. But in recent years that has changed.

Now, you are in terrible danger.

Worldwide, sharks like you are being **ruthlessly** hunted and brutally slaughtered. Over the past 10 years, an average of 100 million sharks have been killed every year.

That's right: 100 million sharks.

Every year.

In some parts of the world, sharks have vanished. Many species, including great whites, are in danger of extinction.

What brutal creature is killing the world's sharks?

It does not have fanged teeth or strangling tentacles. It doesn't even live in the sea.

The creature killing the sharks is the human being.

Killing for Soup

People have been hunting sharks for thousands of years. In the 1800s, Americans relied on oil from shark livers to waterproof their ships. Native Americans prized the teeth of tiger and bull sharks, which they used for carving and cutting. But it wasn't until the 1990s that sharks were hunted in staggeringly large numbers. Today, they are hunted for meat and as trophies, but mainly they are hunted for their fins, the key ingredient in shark fin soup.



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A worker arranging shark fins for drying on a rack in Japan.

This soup is a **delicacy** in China, where a single bowl of it can cost \$300. A watery broth filled with stringy strands of shark fin, the soup

is not known for its good taste. Rather, it is served to impress important guests at occasions like banquets and weddings.

For centuries, only a small number of Chinese people were wealthy enough to afford the soup. But since the late 1980s, wealth in China has been growing. Today, millions can afford luxuries like fancy cars, designer clothing—and shark fin soup. As the demand for shark fins has skyrocketed, so has the price. The **dorsal** and **pectoral** fins of a great white can sell for thousands of dollars each.

On any given day, thousands of fishing boats are out in the ocean, prowling the seas for sharks. Many trail wire fishing lines hundreds of feet long and studded with as many as 1,500 hooks baited with raw meat. Some boats can catch more than 100 sharks on a single trip.

WHY WE NEED SHARKS

Sharks help keep the ocean in balance. Already, the disappearance of sharks has had a dramatic effect on the ecosystem. Here is one example.

1. Because of overfishing off the east coast of the U.S., bull sharks disappear from these waters.
2. With the bull sharks gone, numbers of their main prey, the cownose ray, explode.
3. Cownose rays devour all the scallops off the North Carolina coast. Now there are almost no scallops left there.
4. Humans who eat North Carolina scallops are out of luck. So are the fishermen whose jobs depend on scallops.



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Many fishermen don't even bother to bring the sharks back to shore. They just hack off the fins while at sea and leave the sharks to die in the ocean.

Rising Alarm

Sharks are some of Earth's oldest creatures. Tens of millions of years ago, as *Tyrannosaurus rex* was roaring across America's Great Plains, ancestors of today's sharks were cruising the world's oceans. Now, these ancient and fascinating creatures could soon be wiped off the face of the planet.

By the early 2000s, worried scientists were warning that China's appetite for shark fin soup was endangering the world's shark populations. Indeed, over the past decades, the population of some shark species has dropped 99 percent. Great white, tiger, bull, and hammerhead sharks are in particular danger.

Extinction would be tragic for sharks, of course, but it would also spell disaster for fragile ocean ecosystems—and the humans who depend on the ocean for food. The disappearance of an apex predator would have an impact on almost every other species of fish, causing some populations to boom and others to vanish.

Attacks Are Rare

Imagine once again that you are a great white shark, swimming through the ocean.

Are you doomed?

Just a few years ago, many scientists thought so. That, however, was before WildAid got involved.

WildAid is one of several wildlife groups working to save the planet's many endangered species. The shark presented them with a difficult case. People tend to want to help animals that they care about. Pictures of baby elephants and wide-eyed pandas melt our hearts and move us to donate to causes dedicated to saving them. But looking at a photo of a great white shark—the blood-red mouth, the dead black eyes—few people think, “Awwwww.” More likely, they shudder and recall the frightening stories of shark attacks that make headlines every year.

It is true that an average of 80 people are bitten by sharks each year, and that each incident is horrifying. But given the number of people who swim and surf in the ocean, these incidents are extremely rare. A beachgoer is 15 times more likely to be killed by a falling coconut than by a shark. Still, many people believe the world might be a better place without sharks, which has made it difficult for scientists to rally support for shark conservation.

Until now.

The leaders of WildAid realized that few Chinese people understood the true cost of shark fin soup. So WildAid enlisted some of China's biggest celebrities, like basketball player Yao Ming and actor Jackie Chan, to raise awareness. WildAid also ran ads on TV showing gruesome scenes of sharks being slaughtered. The campaign attracted enormous attention and has been more successful than anyone dared hope. Many young people are refusing to serve shark fin soup at their weddings, and in 2012, the Chinese government banned the soup



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Many shark-bite survivors like surfer Bethany Hamilton, who lost her arm in a shark attack when she was 13, are fighting to save sharks. “If you care about the ocean, you care about sharks,” she says.

from official banquets. In 2013, the number of shark fins imported into China dropped by nearly 30 percent.

Reason for Hope

Eventually, as fewer people want shark fin soup, fishermen will not be able to demand high prices for fins. Soon, experts hope, fins will be all but worthless, and fishermen will have no reason to hunt sharks.

WildAid founder Peter Knights points out that the success of the campaign shows that even difficult problems can be solved with creative thinking.

But for now, danger still lurks for you and other sharks. Stay away from fishing boats, with their terrible nets and thousand-hook fishing lines. Steer clear of crowded beaches with splashing humans, where the sight of your fin knifing through the water will cause panic.

But don’t despair. There is reason to hope that the humans who have threatened you will, one day, learn to prize you. And perhaps millions of years from now, your descendants will be the most powerful creatures in the ocean, just as you are today.

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