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In Galápagos, Sharks Worth More Alive Than Dead

by SCOTT HENDERSON

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Fisherman finning a shark in Malaysia. (© Keith A. Ellenbogen)

Shark Week is with us again, and so is all the gore and sensationalism regarding the bloodthirsty habits of these ocean predators. So, just how voracious are these “man-eaters”?

Each year, there are about 10 fatal shark attacks on humans. In stark contrast, humans kill an estimated 73 million sharks per year — mostly destined for the Chinese market as the key ingredient for the tasteless, nutrition-less status dish known as shark fin soup. And you thought Olympian Usain Bolt was good at winning by a wide margin!

In the [Galápagos Islands](#), where I have lived for the past 20 years, we don't eat our sharks, even though they are — so to speak — our bread and butter. In fact, all shark fishing is banned within the Galápagos Marine Reserve, and in a groundbreaking effort a few years ago, the Ecuadorian government outlawed all targeted shark fishing in Ecuadorian national waters.

If there is such a high demand for sharks and the Chinese are paying so well, why would a nation do this? Indeed, why have over a dozen additional nations, including the Bahamas, Maldives, Palau, Honduras and others followed suit? And why have a growing number of U.S.

states, including California, Hawaii, Washington, Oregon and Illinois, gone even farther to outlaw the commerce of shark fins within their borders?

There are three answers to this question:

1. **Ocean health.** For coastal countries like Ecuador and states such as California that have huge economies and food security dependent on fishing, adopting measures that reduce shark capture is a sound investment in overall ocean health, for which sharks play an important role as regulators of ecosystem function.
2. **Anti-cruelty.** For inland states such as Illinois, an ethical and sustainability element comes into play. Do states or nations really want to be part of a global trade chain that often depends on ruthlessly hacking off a live animal's fins and throwing it back into the water to drown?
3. **Income.** Finally, it is simple economics, as in the case of Galápagos, Bahamas, Palau, Hawaii and elsewhere. Plain and simple, a live shark is worth far more than a dead shark.

Dive tourism is one of the fastest growing segments within the already burgeoning nature tourism market. In Galápagos, the main attraction is sharks — and lots of them. **A “set” of hammerhead shark fins may sell for well over US\$ 100**, as will each of the several bowls of shark fin soup that can be made from these fins. **However, the average diver in Galápagos is paying well over US\$ 5000 each for the opportunity to see a live shark in the water.** *(Learn more about the role of sharks in ecotourism in the video below, shot in Fiji's Shark Reef Marine Reserve.)*



Importantly, a dead shark's fins are used only once and benefit one fisherman. In contrast, a live shark can be seen multiple times, in multiple locations, from many dive boats. In fact, our tagging studies show that **hammerheads seen in Galápagos have been seen later by tourists in distant locations**, including Colombia's Malpelo Sanctuary and Cocos Island National Park.

As millions tune in to Shark Week, many people will see different things. Some will see the chilling, cold-blooded killer inspired by “Jaws,” others will see a future bowl of soup. Some will see a graceful, ancient miracle of evolution, and others will see big dollar signs. What is clear is that 73 million to 10 is a pretty lopsided scoreboard ... but fortunately for sharks, the



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times seem to be changing.

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