

How Hong Kong Is Enforcing Legal Trade in Shark Fins

A decade of conservation changed a species' image from villain to vulnerable

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The Pew Charitable Trusts/Stan Shea of BLOOM Hong Kong addresses participants in a 2014 implementation workshop on CITES shark listings in Hong Kong.

This is the sixth in a series of articles commemorating a decade of shark conservation. The interview has been edited for clarity and length.

Hong Kong has long been known as the center of the global trade in shark fins and a bustling market for a huge range of wildlife products. But over the past 10 years, this special administrative region of China has reduced consumption of shark fin soup and increased

enforcement of shark and ray trade restrictions under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES)—key advancements to help conserve and manage these species, many of which have long been misunderstood predators when in fact humans have been preying upon them unchecked for decades.

In 2018, the Hong Kong government passed the Protection of Endangered Species of Animals and Plants (Amendment) Bill 2017, which raised maximum fines and prison sentences for those convicted of illegally selling or buying products from any species listed on Appendix II of CITES, including the 20 commercially important species of sharks and rays. Species listed on Appendix II can be traded internationally only if the trade is sustainable and does not cause detriment to the animal in the wild.



Stan Shea, during a dive in Hong Kong in 2010. “As of today, more than 5 metric tons of illegally imported fins have been confiscated in Hong Kong,” he says.

The Pew Charitable Trusts caught up with Stan Shea, marine scientist and shark fin trade expert with BLOOM Hong Kong, a marine conservation nonprofit, for insight on how attitudes, behavior, and policy on shark conservation have shifted in Hong Kong.

Q: What information about the Hong Kong shark fin trade is known today that wasn’t available 10 years ago?

A: There are now baseline surveys that identify the diversity of sharks and related species, which in turn provide the species composition of the shark fin retail market. BLOOM has worked with Stony Brook University to complete these surveys since 2014, by sampling shark fin trimmings from a dried seafood market in Hong Kong and using DNA analysis to determine which species were present.

Q: How has the perception of sharks and consumption of shark fin soup in Hong Kong changed?

A: BLOOM and the University of Hong Kong's Social Sciences Research Centre conducted sociological surveys on the shark fin consumption patterns and habits of Hong Kong residents. The survey was conducted in 2009 and 2014, each time involving 1,000 respondents. Between those five years, 53 percent of those surveyed reduced their consumption of shark fin, while 16 percent had stopped eating shark fin entirely. When asked for the reason behind their change in consumption, respondents said environmental issues were a key reason.

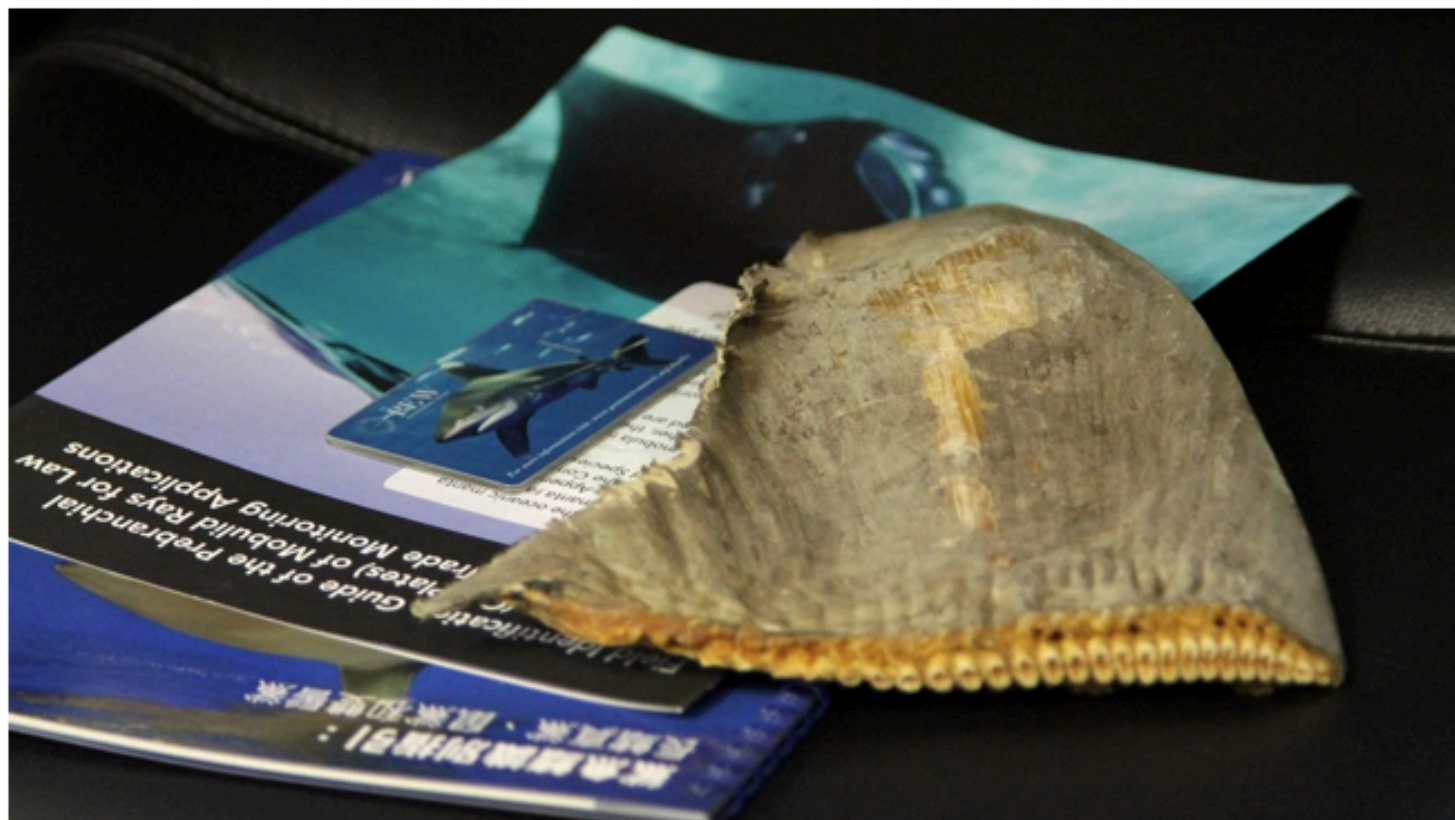
Q: How has Hong Kong acted to implement CITES listings, and what is its biggest success in the fight against the illegal fin trade?

A: Since 2014, Hong Kong has held capacity building trainings to provide customs officers a highly practical method to visually determine whether shipments of shark fins belong to CITES-listed species. As of today, more than 5 metric tons of illegally imported fins have been confiscated in Hong Kong.

Q: Customs officers around the world have many tools, such as identification guides and DNA manuals, to help prevent illegal trade of shark fins. Which tools do Hong Kong's customs and enforcements officers use most often?

A: At the moment, the most often used tool by the Hong Kong government is the visual identification guides, as these give the customs officers a highly practical method of determining whether shipments of fins are CITES-listed. The DNA manuals and real-time

PCR machines [devices that analyze DNA] were more recently introduced to the Hong Kong government, which is proactively working on adding this to its protocol for seizure and prosecution, to be used in parallel with the visual identification method for the highest effectiveness.



An unprocessed shark fin is displayed at the workshop in Hong Kong, along with tools to identify whether it is from a listed species.

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Q: What does Hong Kong's success tell you about the possibilities of reducing the illegal fin trade worldwide?

A: I think it shows that the government here in Hong Kong is striving hard to combat illegal shark fin trade. Their use of the fin ID guide has shown that the method is helpful in monitoring the trade situation in Hong Kong, and now we can see that they are trying to do more by looking at using DNA technologies in tandem with visual identification, to more effectively implement CITES listings. If Hong Kong can do it using these simple tools, then it is also possible worldwide. While we are all part of the problem, we can choose to be part of the solution.