

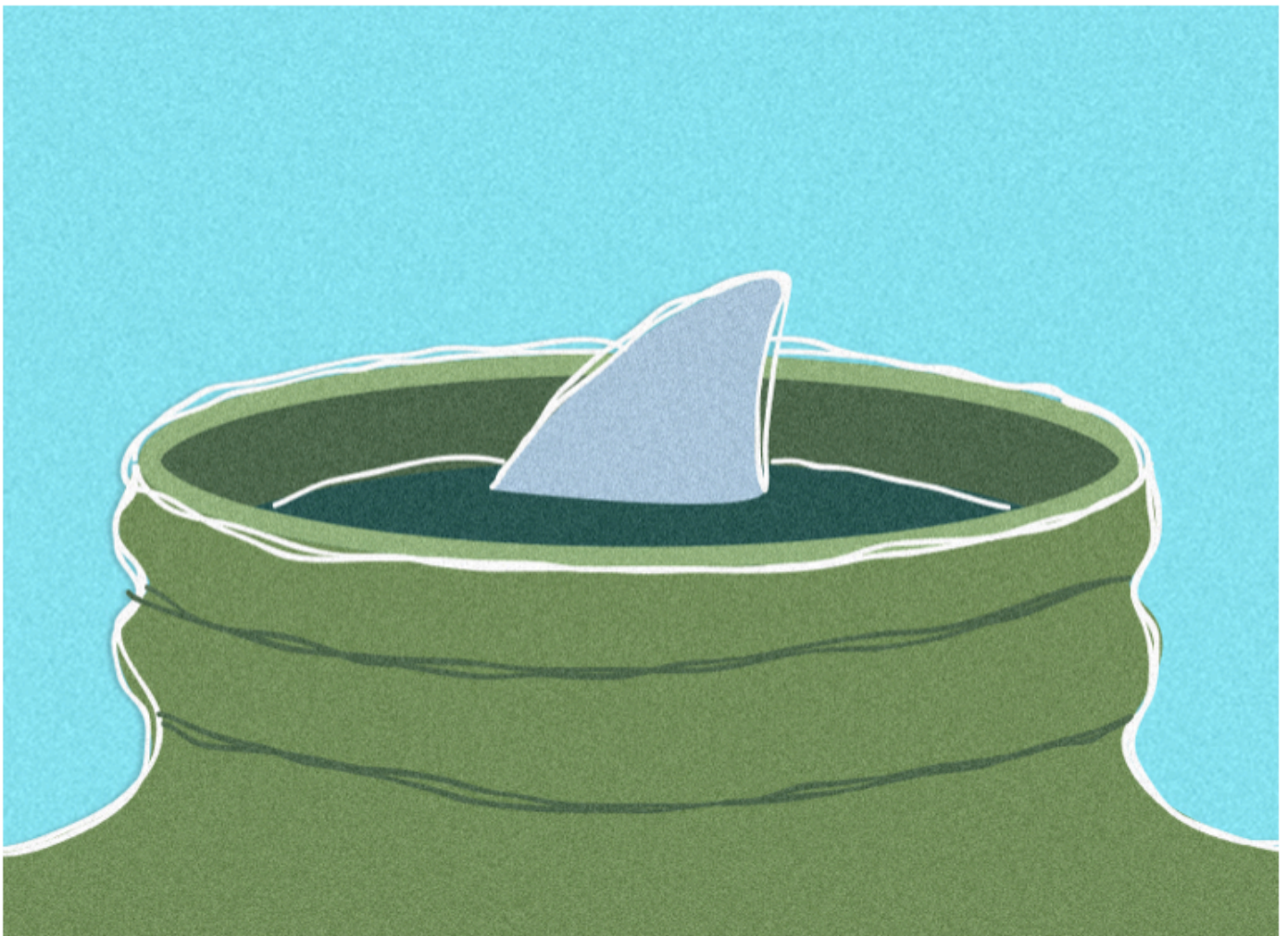
FYI, Your Fave Face Cream Might Contain Sharks

Squalene oil is lauded for its anti-inflammatory and anti-aging properties. The OG ingredient is derived from shark livers, though many companies say they've switched to plant-based options. But have they *really*?



BY SYDNEY LONEY

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(Illustration: Joel Louzado)

I've amassed an impressive array of lipsticks and lotions over the years. Some I use occasionally, some I keep *in case* I might use them and some I use so often that I restock

those emollient elixirs the instant their sleek pumps, jars or tubes feel a little too light in my hands. But of all the products I've purchased in the past, I can honestly say I've never once checked a label for the presence of squalane. Now, after speaking with Sandy and Brian Stewart, I'm actually afraid to look—in case of what I might find.

The Stewarts are celebrating a recent win: In June, Canada became the first G20 country to ban the trade of shark fins. It's something the couple has been fighting for ever since their son, Canadian filmmaker Rob Stewart, died in a diving accident in 2017 while filming a sequel to his 2006 documentary, *Sharkwater*.

The shark fin ban is a big deal, considering Canada was the largest importer of shark fins outside of Asia. Of course, there's a "but" and, in this case, it's shark liver oil. "Getting a ban on shark liver oil, that's next," says Brian. "We need an outright ban on the use of sharks in cosmetics—it's an awareness issue. People just don't know."

I can attest to that. I truly had no idea that every time I dutifully apply my sunscreen, or moisturize my skin or slick on a little lip balm, I may very well be slathering shark on my face.

Why is there shark liver oil in my beauty products?

Squalene is a lipid found naturally in many plants and animals ("squalane" is the purified, hydrogenated version). As a moisturizing ingredient, it's non-greasy, smooth-textured, water soluble and resistant to extreme temperatures, making it perfect for beauty products.

Although you can find squalene in everything from olive oil to sugar cane, deep-sea sharks like gulper and dog fish sharks have especially large reserves in their livers, which they use for buoyancy. And unfortunately for these sharks, their squalene is cheaper than the version you can harmlessly pull from plants.

In 2012, [Bloom](#), a Paris-based non-profit organization dedicated to preserving the marine environment, published the [first-ever assessment of the global squalane market](#) and found

that between three and six million deep-sea sharks are killed every year to meet the needs of the shark liver oil market, fuelled largely by the cosmetics industry. In 2015, the organization conducted a follow-up study to pinpoint how often shark squalane can be found in the products we use every day. Researchers tested 72 moisturizing creams with squalane listed among their ingredients. None of the labels specified whether it came from sharks or plants, but the researchers discovered that one in five of the products contained shark squalane.

Other than the indisputable ick factor, why should we care about where the squalane in our cosmetics comes from? Well, for starters, there's the animal cruelty issue. "Deep-sea longlining is annihilating the shark population," Brian says. "They will literally pull sharks onto a boat, hack out their livers, and throw the bodies back into the ocean." Then there's the fact that many deep-sea sharks are already endangered. "We desperately need these animals to maintain the balance in the world's oceans — it's not just about plastic," he says. And, finally, as the 2012 Bloom report states, "The decline of top predators could have disastrous consequences on marine ecosystems." Brian sums it up even more succinctly: "If our oceans go down, we go down."

So... who exactly is using shark squalane?

The Bloom study found that in more than 80% of the creams that contained shark squalane, the squalane was a blend of plant and shark, with the shark part often making up more than 50 per cent. What's really frustrating, says Dr. Frédéric Le Manach, scientific director of Bloom and one of the study's authors, is that there shouldn't be any shark in there at all. "Both animal and vegetal sources of squalane have the same quality and properties, so it makes absolutely no sense to keep killing fragile wild animals in order to obtain a component we can also extract from olive oil."

All of the brands tested came from companies based in Europe, the United States and Asia. Those that produced creams laced with shark include Bliss from the U.S., IOMA and Topicrem from France and Méthode Swiss from Switzerland. The worst offenders were

brands from Asia (53 per cent of the Asian brands tested contained shark squalane, including BRTC, Cyber Colors, Just Beyond Organature, Missha, Dr. Ci: Labo, Haba and Menard).

On the upside, Le Manach says that between the two studies many companies had already cleaned up their supply chains and converted to plant-based squalane. “One of the brands was very surprised to be red-listed in the 2015 study, but we found out that its supplier apparently sold *shark* squalane as *olive* squalane.” Some companies, like Unilever and L’Oréal, have been very public about their switch from plants to sharks (these two cosmetic giants made the switch back in 2008), while others, like Lush, are doing their best to raise awareness (Lush recently [launched a campaign](#) with 100 per cent of the sales of its Shark Fin Soap going to the [Rob Stewart Sharkwater Foundation](#)).

But not everyone is on board the shark-free bandwagon, and it can be hard to tell whether the product you’re purchasing is using squalane from plants or animals, Le Manach says. “Misleading labels are a real problem, and we also know that certification schemes can’t be fully trusted either,” he says.

The tricky thing about labels

Some of the brands in the Bloom study used misleading marketing, like Beyond, which lists squalane as a “natural ingredient” in order to avoid disclosing its origin. Other brands used eco-certified ingredients for some of their products and made a big deal about their commitment to environmental sustainability while continuing to use shark squalane.

[Sarah Jay](#), a Toronto-based fashion director and creator of Toxic Beauty, a film that addresses the human health consequences of the conventional personal care industry, says greenwashing continues to be a huge issue and that even products that claim to be vegan or cruelty free can’t necessarily be trusted because there’s no third-party testing to verify the claims. (Plus, she says, the “cruelty free” trademark is given to product formulations *after* market, when individual ingredients have already been animal tested.)

“I think the biggest obstacle for people is the realization that products sold to us in the name of beauty and hygiene are entirely unregulated,” says Jay. “Ingredient origin doesn’t need to be disclosed on product labels. Whether an ingredient is grown synthetically in a lab, derived from a plant, squeezed from the livers of at-risk species, boiled out of a chicken comb, or extracted from equine urine, it’s listed the same way.”

So, what can you do to keep shark off your skin?

Jay encourages us to be skeptical and to remember that the cosmetic industry is concerned with making money, not with public health or safety or protecting deep-sea sharks.

“Products are designed to perform, to be shelf-stable, to catch your eye, to fit into shipping boxes and neatly onto shelves alongside their competitors.”

She recommends contacting your local MP to let them know that labelling transparency is important to you. Meanwhile, Le Manach suggests going directly to the companies themselves. If you pick up a product that lists squalane in the ingredients, don’t assume it’s coming from plants, he says. “Pick up your phone, tweet or send an email to the brand to inquire about the source of the squalane—and demand a plant-based one.” He says you can also tap into your inner scientist and initiate your own “citizen science project.” All you need is to find a lab that will conduct the analysis. “No brand can resist thousands of citizens asking the same question and demanding changes,” Le Manach says.

The Rob Stewart Sharkwater Foundation is currently compiling a list of brands that use plant-derived squalane in their products. “Once people understand that there are sharks in their products, they’ll make the change to buy something different,” Sandy says. The Stewarts hope that companies that don’t appear on the list will want to be there—and will make the switch from sharks to plants. “We need to hold them accountable,” Brian says. “It’s about supporting companies working toward creating a better world versus supporting companies that are destroying that world—it’s as simple as that.”