

## Why We Support a Shark Fin Ban in the U.S.

By

*Lora Snyder, Campaign Director at Oceana*

*Iris Ho, Wildlife Program Manager at Humane Society International*

*Peter Knights, Executive Director at WildAid*

*Christopher Chin, Executive Director at COARE*

Last month, the journal *Marine Policy* published an opinion piece from two scientists, David Shiffman and Robert Hueter, who argued that a proposed United States shark fin trade ban – the Shark Fin Trade Elimination Act (SFTEA) – would undermine sustainable shark fisheries. We, and many in the science and conservation communities, disagree.

One of the greatest threats to sharks is the global demand for fins, which encourages shark finning – a brutal and wasteful practice in which a shark’s fins are cut off and the animal is thrown back into the ocean where it drowns, bleeds to death, or is eaten alive by other fish. We support the SFTEA because it aims to eliminate the U.S. demand for shark fins.

While shark finning is illegal in U.S. waters, shark fins continue to be bought and sold across the U.S. Fins in the U.S. can come from legal U.S. shark fisheries, but they can also be imported from countries that have no shark finning regulations, from fisheries on the high seas where finning regulations are difficult to enforce, and even from illegal finning in U.S. waters. In fact, a [new paper](#) revealed that more than 90 percent of fins in the global fin trade come from unsustainable sources, and that a number of shark species fished in the U.S. lack stock assessments that would evaluate their sustainability. While it may seem as though banning imports would solve the problem, it is not that simple. The U.S. is a member of the World Trade Organization, which prohibits us from refusing entry of products that the U.S. itself exports.

Even in U.S. waters, our anti-finning law does not effectively stop shark finning. According to government records cited during recent Congressional testimony, more than 500 alleged shark finning incidents, some involving dozens of sharks or more, have taken place in U.S. waters since January 2010. That is approximately five cases every month. These statistics do not include shark finning offenses that went undetected by law enforcement. Once a fin is removed from a shark it is impossible to tell if it was obtained legally or illegally, meaning that legal and illegal fins can be mixed once they reach the market. Prohibiting the trade of shark fins in the U.S. is the only way to ensure that no fins from finned sharks are sold legally within our borders, and thus it is the best way for the U.S. to deter shark finning.

Shiffman and Hueter argue that a fin ban threatens sustainable shark fisheries even though the SFTEA would not shut down any of the (few) shark fisheries in the U.S. Under the SFTEA, authorized fishers could still fish for and sell shark meat and other shark parts, but the fins would be required to be discarded, just like the head and viscera already are in many fisheries. If a fishery did close because of the ban, it would suggest that the fishery was catching sharks primarily for the sake of selling their fins – which is exactly the problem that needs to be solved.

The authors also cited a survey finding that 90 percent of 102 surveyed members of scientific research societies focusing on sharks and rays preferred sustainable shark fisheries as a strategy instead of a total ban on shark products (including meat, fins, etc.). As we explained above, the SFTEA does not propose to ban all shark products. Even worse, the authors cited only one specific part of the survey result that

made it sound like most scientists oppose a fin trade ban, when in fact, the authors blatantly omitted the relevant finding *in that very same survey* that most respondents *supported* a ban on the sale of shark fins. The authors object to conservation advocates conflating shark finning and shark fishing. However, the authors themselves confuse shark fin trade bans and a ban on all shark products to make their point.

Moreover, that survey is not the only documented support for a fin trade ban. [In a letter to Congress](#), led by Dr. Francesco Ferretti of Stanford University, 150 scientists urged passage of the SFTEA. Signers include a veritable who's who of marine scientists from academia, private companies, government and NGOs.

Shiffman and Hueter stated that the elimination of the U.S. fin trade would have a negligible impact on reducing global shark mortality. This argument is misguided and disingenuous. It wrongly implies that the only goal of the SFTEA is a blanket reduction in global shark mortality and that the U.S. alone can achieve that goal. As mentioned above, the SFTEA would not result in the closure of any sustainable, meat-driven shark fisheries in the U.S., but rather, would shut the doors to shark fins being imported from countries that do not manage sharks sustainably. Internationally, this multifaceted problem requires multifaceted solutions. More than 80 countries around the world catch sharks and trade in shark products. When we allow the importation of shark fins from countries like Myanmar and China, we are complicit in the catch of at-risk species and condoning their lack of finning regulations.

After lamenting the SFTEA's "insignificant" impact, the authors went on to say that a shark fin sale ban in the U.S. would "open the door to increased market share for . . . nations not practicing sustainable shark fishing, including those that have not yet prohibited finning." This logic is contradictory. The authors cannot simultaneously argue that the U.S. leaving the fin trade would do next to nothing to save sharks, and at the same time argue that this insignificant impact would then have a significant impact by broadening the market for the worst players. Just because a door closes does not mean that another one opens, and in the case of the U.S., the door will be closed to unsustainable countries.

Finally, the authors cited "cultural clashes" as a reason to reject the SFTEA. This statement itself is culturally insensitive, suggesting that all Asians insist on consuming shark fins or do not care about saving sharks. The statement ignores multiple gains on shark protections in Asia. Our organizations have decades of experience working with local advocates in Hong Kong, China and other places in Asia to reduce the demand for shark fins, collectively reaching millions of people. We are seeing an encouraging change in attitude—more and more people are shunning shark fin consumption. Young couples choose not to serve shark fins at their weddings. Many top Chinese business leaders publicly denounce shark fins. This past January, China's national carrier, Air China, announced that it will not accept shark fin cargos. The list of positive changes for sharks in Asia goes on.

The demand for shark fins is a global problem that will require a global solution. The U.S. cannot do it alone, and we are not alone, as illustrated above. The SFTEA can help the U.S. make a huge step in the right direction. We cannot ask other countries to protect sharks unless we are no longer providing economic incentives for them to behave badly. We must lead by example. By getting the U.S. to step up, we can encourage other countries to do the same. And in this way, a significant reduction in global demand for fins will have a real impact on rebuilding shark populations.