



Shark Fin Trade Myths and Truths: BYCATCH

What is bycatch?

"Bycatch" is marine life caught unintentionally in a fishery that is targeting other fish. Worldwide commercial fisheries discard an estimated 38.5 million tonnes of marine life, comprising over 40% of the estimated total marine catchⁱ.

What does bycatch have to do with sharks?

Most bycatch of sharks comes from open ocean fishing fleets that target valuable fish such as tuna, using thousands of baited hooks on miles of long-line. Until relatively recently, this shark 'bycatch' was considered a nuisance, and sharks were cut loose and allowed to swim away. However, as shark fins have become increasingly valuable, these fleets have little incentive to take measures to reduce shark bycatch. Often sharks that would have been released alive are now retained whole or "finned" with the bodies dumped at sea.

An estimated 50 million sharks are caught unintentionally as bycatch in commercial fisheries every year. In addition to longlines, bottom trawling and gillnetting also produce large numbers of shark bycatchⁱⁱ.

Common myths about shark "bycatch" from opponents of shark fin trade restrictions.

Myth: *"The shark fin trade is not the problem. Most sharks are caught as unwanted and unused bycatch. Sharks are not targeted for their fins."*

Truth: There are means available to decrease bycatch of sharks, but the high value of shark fins is a strong economic incentive to NOT decrease this bycatch. For example, simple gear changes, such as switching from steel to nylon leaders, have been demonstrated to reduce shark bycatch and improve catch of 'target' speciesⁱⁱⁱ. Additionally, new hook designs including "weak" hooks and "smart" hooks^{iv}, shark deterrents and other shark avoidance measures could greatly reduce shark bycatch while also resulting in potentially higher yields of target species and time savings for fishing crews^v.

Finally, most sharks, especially blue sharks, which are by far the most common bycatch species caught in high seas fisheries, have high survival rates when released^{vi}.



SHARKSAVERS



Myth: “The shark fin trade is just making use of an unwanted byproduct that would have otherwise been discarded.”

Truth: “Shark fins are now among the most expensive seafood items in the world, and depending on species, may fetch retail prices of over US \$400 per kg in the world’s largest fin market in Hong Kong^{vii}. The value of shark fin is reported to be 20 to 250 times the value of meat by weight.^{viii} Logically, it makes little sense that the most expensive part of the animal would be considered an unwanted by-product.

Myth: “Retaining shark bycatch will provide valuable fisheries data that can be used to improve conservation measures.”

Truth: Since the vast majority of sharks can be released alive (greater than 95% for the species most commonly caught as bycatch^{ix}), requiring retention of bycatch would require that fishermen kill sharks that could have been released alive. Therefore, the incentive for retaining bycatch is the economic value of the fins.

Commercial fishing fleets and fishermen will not retain and bring bycatch back to port unless they can sell the fins^x. If retention is required for research purposes only, oversight and compliance will be almost impossible to enforce. Experience has shown that data collection using on-board observers is a much more reliable means of gathering data on fisheries and bycatch.

REFERENCES AND ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

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^{ix} Moyes et al. 2006

^x Gilman et al. 2008