

MAKING AND REMAKING TRADITION: A CULTURAL HISTORY OF SHARK FIN

Protecting and preserving the oceans – “blue sustainability” – is an environmental priority. But the way we treat sea creatures like sharks threatens this. Despite growing bans around the world on the brutal practice of shark finning, sharks are still eaten as a traditional, luxury food item.

Dr Ronald Po’s research reveals the histories behind the emergence of shark fin consumption in late imperial China. Showing how traditions are made, his research suggests they can also be undone, calling for us to urgently end shark fin consumption and adopt new sustainable practices.

WHAT IS SHARK FINNING?

Sharks typically have between 5-7 fins to move through water and maintain their stability. Shark finning is a brutal process where fins are cut from live sharks to be used for human consumption. The sharks are then thrown back into the sea to die.

The prestige of shark fins is a human invention – so why do we cling to traditions that are ecologically destructive and ethically indefensible? Sustainability isn’t just the domain of policymakers, marine biologists, scientists, geographers and environmentalists. Understanding how traditions historically evolved gives us the power to change them. We have both the power, and responsibility, to rethink shark fin consumption and stop eating sharks.

The choice is ours to make.



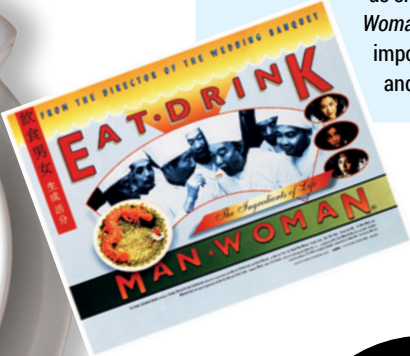
RETHINKING LUXURY: THE CASE OF SHARK FIN SOUP

In China, shark fin soup is a delicacy that is often eaten and served on special occasions, such as wedding banquets. But when did this deeply rooted tradition emerge?

Up until the 11th century, seafood was not widely embraced in China. However, the Ming period (1368-1644) saw the emergence of a dynamic marine food culture as part of a broader transformation of China’s economy. Wealth was for both accumulation and display, and food became a sign of prestige. Eating shark fin was a marker of status and culinary sophistication.

Shark fin soup grew in popularity among upper-class consumers in the Qing period (1644-1912) as luxury spending continued. Intellectuals wrote about the dish, praising its gastronomic excellence.

This association with luxury continues today – in the 1980s, for instance, pouring shark fin soup over rice was a symbol of rapid economic growth and prosperity in Hong Kong. But while shark fin soup is an elaborate, skilful and time-consuming dish to prepare – as shown in Ang Lee’s 1994 film, *Eat Drink Man Woman* – the presentation and ingredients are important because shark fins are largely tasteless and lack nutritional value.

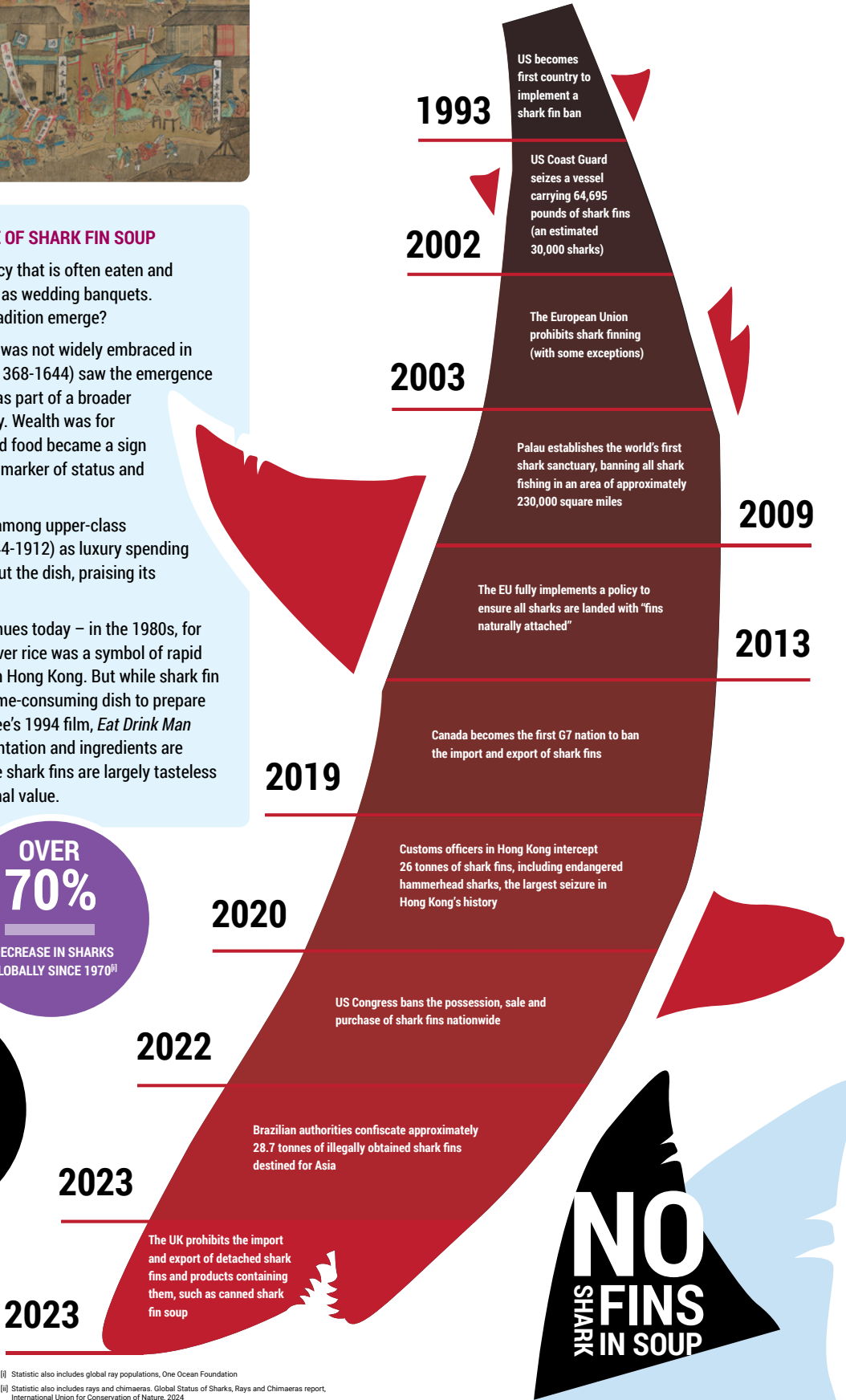


SCAN TO HEAR MORE
FROM RONALD PO
ABOUT HIS RESEARCH

80m
ESTIMATED SHARKS
KILLED BY FISHING
IN 2019^[iii]

OVER 37%
SHARKS THREATENED
WITH EXTINCTION^[ii]

OVER 70%
DECREASE IN SHARKS
GLOBALLY SINCE 1970^[i]



[i] Statistic also includes global ray populations, One Ocean Foundation
[ii] Statistic also includes rays and chimaeras, Global Status of Sharks, Rays and Chimaeras report, International Union for Conservation of Nature, 2024
[iii] Global shark fishing mortality article, Boris Worm et al, Science journal, January 2024