

Urgent need for ban on shark finning
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Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM) is highly disturbed at news of shark finning carried out regularly in the diving haven of Sipadan, off the coast of Semporna in Sabah.

There is no reprieve for sharks as calls from academics, divers, conservationists, social activist and NGOs for a ban on shark hunting have proven futile, following a disclosure from the Sabah Department of Fisheries that a total ban on shark hunting could not be imposed, as not all shark species found in Malaysian waters are endangered, and killing is at a sustainable level.

It is a known fact that shark finning is widespread, largely unmanaged and unmonitored.

With increasing demand for shark fins for Chinese shark fin soup and traditional cures, improved fishing technology, and improved market economics, these will surely lead to an increase in shark finning in years to come.

A well enforced ban on finning is only a first step towards managing sharks properly as commercially fished species.

The Fisheries department has a responsibility to implement science-based, precautionary management measures for targeted shark species.

So long as sharks are being fished without catch limits or long term management plans, that responsibility is not being met.

A regulation on finning is intended to stop this wasteful practice. It is not known how widespread the practice is, but there is ample evidence in the videos of international and local divers and even tourists of dead sharks with fins removed, contrary to the Fisheries Department's claim that shark hunting is carried out on a sustainable level. Sustainability aside, it is the cruelty that provokes most anger.

The practice of cutting off a shark's fins and discarding the body at sea is driven by high international value for the fins, but there is relatively lower value for shark meat.

The tragedy is sharks are not being fished to feed hungry people. They are wiping these animals out for a high-priced luxury item. And they are wiping them out faster than we can study them.

Questions as to their breeding ground, whether they migrate from island to island, the unseen threats to sharks and whether their population is decreasing or increasing will have to be seriously considered before concluding that it is not essential for a total ban to be imposed.

The truth is humans are far more dangerous to sharks than they are to us due to our predatory for shark fin.

Commercial fishermen are taking more and more sharks for their meat as well. The government and its people must realise that sharks are inextricably linked to the marine world.

Losing these top predators creates a cascading imbalance. The species whose numbers the sharks once controlled begin to explode which then wipe out smaller fish, some of which humans depend on for food.

Water quality suffers. Healthy oceans require sharks, and without healthy oceans, healthy fisheries are

impossible. Though the appetite for shark fin soup is greatest in Asia, the carnage is global. Shark fin soup is no reason to decimate a species or ruin the oceans.

There is no way to save them without saving their prey, and there is no way to prevent the fishing of one species while allowing indiscriminate gears to pick off anything that comes in their path.

The Fisheries Department and the relevant government agencies must act together if they want to ensure a livelihood for fishers and a future for sharks.

Banning finning and sale of shark fins are welcome steps. Though there is no control over the growing passion for shark fin soup, steps should be taken by the relevant authorities to stop the import of all shark fins and shark products.

At the same time SAM calls for an amendment to the Fisheries Act to include all endangered shark species.

People should also be taught on the medical harm from the consumption of high levels of toxic mercury reportedly found in shark fins.

It is time to protect sharks in the way as we have for elephants, tigers and all our endangered wildlife.

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