



# Porcupine!

Newsletter of the Department of Ecology & Biodiversity, The University of Hong Kong

## Sharks Fins; Tipping Points?

Every now and again, Society shifts a little in its worldview; an idea or attitude, once considered outrageous, unreasonable, or laughable becomes credible, even fashionable. Such a change can happen quite suddenly, maybe following a particular event, or because of a special set of converging circumstances. When the change is abrupt, it is sometimes referred to as a 'tipping point', an expansion on its original reference to a specific social phenomenon, coined by Morton Grodzins in the 1960s. This concept was picked up more recently by Malcolm Gladwell in his bestselling book 'The Tipping Point'. I recommend this book to anyone interested in the transformation of ideas into action.

I would like to suggest that Hong Kong's attitude towards the use of shark fins has reached one 'tipping point', and explore reasons why this might have happened, as well as identify what remains to be tipped. The manifestation of a shift in attitude was an agreement by the University of Hong Kong's Safety, Health and Environment Committee that there are good environmental reasons for strongly discouraging the sale of shark's fin dishes in any form at HKU, and to ban it from official functions (<http://www.hku.hk/publications/> - Bulletin Volume 7 November 2005). Universities are, by nature, conservative and I applaud HKU for its unequivocal stance on this issue, as well as for setting a clear example to local Society. This decision, small as it may seem, reflects considerable changes in Hong Kong since campaigns began several years ago to raise awareness about the issues surrounding shark fin fisheries. Given that Hong Kong is the major global importer of shark fins, and given the cultural significance of shark fin dishes to many people within China, including of course in Hong Kong, what does the university's decision tell us about changing attitudes?



My personal opinion is that several factors converged to 'tip' HKU into action, and that several more tipping points are needed before Society can balance natural resource limits (i.e. sharks), on the one hand, and consumer demand that exceeds these limits, on the other. What converged were years of persistent and consistent lobbying by a small number of conservation groups and individuals, reliable and readily available biological, fishery and trade information, and the Disney debate. The highly public discussion regarding the serving of shark fin dishes in the new Hong Kong Disneyland, an organization that claims to be environmentally friendly, attracted public attention to Disney's inability to find sustainable sources of shark. Importantly, the debate revealed clearly to many in Hong Kong the realities of shark capture, from live finning, to unsustainable fishing practices and threatened species.

The next step, that of achieving sustainable shark capture practices, should, on the face of it, find broad support. What we know is that most sharks cannot withstand high levels of fishing pressure, that demand for shark fins is higher than their supply, that shark products are economically important for many businesses, and that shark fins have high cultural significance in the region. In the interests of all of these stakeholders, albeit for different reasons, it is important that sharks are exploited sustainably well into the future. The next 'tipping point', therefore, will come when we have found a way to capitalize on these self-interests to limit trade and consumption to levels consistent with natural limits.

There are few options for shark utilisation and management. Given how difficult it is to manage shark fisheries based on quotas (the example of the whale shark, *Rhincodon typus*, in Taiwan on p. 4 is typical), threatened shark species need complete protection until management mechanisms are effectively in place. Other steps involve controlling catches of non-threatened species to within sustainable levels, and a commitment from businesses and consumers to support such practices. One thing is certain; unless something else 'tips', there will soon be no more shark fins, for anyone.

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