

THE CONVERSATION

Shark fin drops off the menu, conservationists claim victory

November 22, 2013 1.49pm AEDT

Mike Fabinyi

Research Fellow at James Cook University



Former NBA player Yao Ming is pictured on a billboard in China, endorsing an anti-shark fin campaign.
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In recent times, China has witnessed a series of campaigns aimed at persuading people to stop eating shark fin soup.

So it is encouraging that, over the past year, shark fin consumption appears to have declined. If some Chinese government sources are to be believed, the fall has been as much as 70%.

Conservationists and anti-shark fin campaigners have been understandably happy at the result, leading some to claim a “victory” for conservation.

But can this drop in shark fin consumption really be attributed to a successful consumer awareness campaign?

A “victory for conservation”?

A former NBA basketball star, Yao Ming, along with a host of other local celebrities, appeared in campaign messages, across radio, television and public transport, to try to convince people to stop eating the popular dish.

The publicity tended to emphasise the cruelty involved in the practice of “finning”, and the drop in numbers of sharks worldwide.

Peter Knight, Executive Director of WildAid, one of the main NGOs behind the anti-shark fin campaign, argues that the decline in consumption suggests the consumer awareness campaigns are working.

“It is a myth that people in Asia don’t care about wildlife. Consumption is based on ignorance rather than malice,” he said.

But the reasons behind this fall in consumption are more complicated. In collaboration with colleagues at the Department of Sociology at Peking University, I investigated consumer attitudes and behaviour towards seafood consumption in Beijing in 2012. Our research is due to be published in the journal *Conservation and Society* in 2014.

We focused on high-value, so-called “luxury” consumption of seafood in banquets. We also examined the impact of the anti-shark fin campaigns.

Out of the 20 restaurant representatives that we interviewed, 19 sold shark fin currently or in the past, and all 19 restaurant representatives reported a significant decline in the consumption of shark fin.

All restaurant operators agreed that the advertisements with Yao Ming had definitely raised awareness among consumers.

But while restaurant operators agreed that the advertisements had raised awareness, they were mixed in their views on how much impact it had on actual consumption practices.

Some suggested, for example, that any reduction in shark fin consumption, as a result of shark conservation campaigns, may be restricted to larger cities such as Beijing.

And restaurateurs pointed to several other factors that, in their view, were more significant in explaining the decline in shark fin consumption in Beijing restaurants.

The most-emphasised was the abundance of fake shark fins on the market. Because synthetic shark fin is increasingly common in restaurants consumers don’t trust buying it. Several restaurant operators we interviewed acknowledged this practice and justified its use on economic grounds.

Others said that shark fin was viewed as overly processed and had gone out of fashion.

More broadly, our analysis suggested that the sustainability of shark populations was not a major concern among luxury seafood buyers. Instead, their own personal health and the freshness of the food were seen as far more important.

The politics of luxury seafood

There have been a wide range of high-profile food safety and food quality scandals in China in recent years. Chinese consumers frequently cite food safety as a pressing issue.

Since we conducted our interviews in 2012, more recent political developments in China concerning government behaviour appear to have had major effects on the luxury seafood market, including shark fin.

Shortly after taking office in late 2012, the new Xi Jinping administration announced a crackdown on the use of public fund expenditures, lavish spending and corruption by government officials.

Such a crackdown appears to have already had a significant impact on luxury seafood restaurants and other luxury industries. In the past year, it is this anti-corruption campaign, more than anything else, which is likely to have had an impact on shark fin consumption.

A plan for consumer awareness campaigns

Consumer awareness campaigns are likely to continue in China for species of wildlife where Chinese consumption is a key driver of declining populations.

Instead of only focusing on environmental sustainability, they may do better to focus on issues that matter more to consumers, such as personal health and food safety.

Endangered live reef food fish such as the Napoleon wrasse, for example, have a host of issues that campaigns could potentially focus on. Cyanide remains a common technique for catching the fish. High quantities of antibiotics and tranquilisers are also fed to them during their long journeys into mainland China.

If consumers were more aware of such health issues they may be less willing to eat the fish.

While this is one example of how food safety and environmental sustainability issues converge, in other cases these issues will be more difficult to integrate.

This suggests that consumer awareness campaigns advocating enhanced environmental sustainability will still have many challenges to overcome.



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Sharks