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PHOTO: AP

FISH FACTS: Of the 400-plus species of sharks, only three are listed as endangered – the basking shark, the whale shark and the great white shark (above). The rest are not classified and can be caught freely.

» SHARK FINNING

Shark's fin soup – eat without guilt

BY GIAM CHOO HOO
For The Straits Times

REPORTS which attribute shark decimation to the consumption of shark's fin soup show that Western activists have succeeded in convincing the public that sharks are killed for their fins only, and that all fins are cruelly cut off while the sharks are still alive.

They paint a distorted picture. There is no reason to be ashamed when ordering the popular soup at a restaurant.

Sharks are caught in virtually all parts of the world – by fishermen in poor countries and by large fishing fleets from developed countries. No state has banned shark fishing and only a few have set limits in certain areas.

Indeed, some members of the European Union are catching, consuming and trading sharks on a big scale.

The Shark Alliance points out that "Spain, Portugal, the UK and France are among the world's top 20 shark-fishing nations that are responsible for 80 per cent of the global catch".

Despite the strongly declared objectives of the Fisheries Commission in Brussels, there are very few restrictions on fishing for sharks in European waters. The meat of dogfishes, smooth-hounds, catsharks, skates and rays is in high demand by European consumers.

The situation in Canada and

the United States is similar: The blue shark is sought after as a sport fish while the porbeagle, mako and spiny dogfish are part of the commercial fishery.

Other species are caught, either targeted or as by-catch that is unintentional or incidental, during fishing operations.

It is a serious problem in most European countries. Fishing fleets targeting tuna and swordfish take substantial numbers of high-sea sharks.

Nonetheless, sharks are not as endangered as other wildlife, for example, the sturgeon, which is sought after for caviar.

There are over 400 species of sharks, and to claim they are on the verge of extinction is to make a sweeping but inaccurate generalisation equivalent to claiming that all birds are endangered.

The UN Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wildlife Fauna and Flora (CITES) lists only three sharks in its Appendix II. The consumption and trade of species in this category is subject to certification. The three are the basking shark, the great white shark and the whale shark. The remaining 397 shark species are not classified at all and can be freely traded and caught.

Fins are by-products of the fishing industry. Though they are valuable, sharks are not normally killed for their fins. A fishing fleet specialising in catching sharks only for their fins would quickly go out of business.

The perception that it is common practice to kill sharks for only their fins – and to cut them off whilst the sharks are still alive – is wrong.

No one denies that such cruelty exists. The footage of "live-finning" has been shown all over the world. However, these sensational pictures obscure the fact that many within the industry are against such practices.

The vast majority of fins in the market are taken from sharks after their death. This is the preliminary finding of a review made with the assistance of shark experts, fishermen, captains of big fishing ships and representatives of fishery departments, the fishing industry, fish markets and fishing ports.

The barbaric practice of "live-finning" is done by some long-line fishing boats, principally targeting tuna. When they get the less valuable sharks in their hooks, they cut the fins and throw the sharks into the water to make room for tuna. This deplorable practice is outlawed in many countries.

The anti-fin group has misrepresented the facts. By aggressively flooding print, TV and Internet media with selective images, they have portrayed an untruth: that all fins are derived from "live-finning". Their aim? They want shark's fin soup to be shunned.

The truth is this: Sharks will continue to be caught and killed on a wide scale by the more organised and sophisticated fishing nations.

Targeting shark's fin soup will not stop this accidental catch. The fins from these catches will be thrown away or turned into animal feed and fertilisers if shark's fin soup is shunned.

The practice to salvage and sell the sharks' fins gives value to discards from the fishing industry of the world, benefiting both poor and rich countries.

I am not an advocate for greater consumption of shark's fin soup. I am saying that it is not a shameful culture.

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