



State mulls ban on shark fins

Updated: January 31, 2012 2:09AM

SPRINGFIELD — Illinois could be on its way to banning the possession and sale of shark fins if state lawmakers decide to take the bait this spring.

A bill sponsored by Rep. Sara Feigenholtz (D-Chicago) would institute the ban on shark fins — the central ingredient in an Asian delicacy — in the state starting July 2013.

“I have a very large, devoted-to-animal group in my district,” she said. “So this landed on my doorstep.”

Shark fin bans have already been implemented in Hawaii, Washington, Oregon and California, and similar legislation has been introduced in Florida and New York.

Feigenholtz said she collaborated with the Illinois wing of the national Humane Society, which is helping lead an effort to curtail shark finning, the practice of extracting the animal's fin and throwing it back in the ocean.

She said even though Illinois is not an ocean state, the appetite for shark fin soup — an Asian delicacy — makes the distribution of shark fins a destructive trade everywhere.

But shark fin soup might already be on its way to extinction at some restaurants.

At the Phoenix restaurant in Chinatown, banquet manager Carol Cheung said the soup has traditionally been served at weddings or large get-togethers. But now the staff is making plans to take it off the menu.

“You will get traditional, die-hard Chinese food enthusiasts that say, ‘I can't have a banquet without having shark fins,’” Cheung said. “I can't remember the last time I had someone order some from me.”

She added that the ban probably wouldn't harm business too much, and that the restaurant has actually tried to dissuade customers from ordering the soup because of its taste and low nutritional value.

“It's too expensive, and people don't like it,” said Ron Moy, part-time manager at Emperor's Choice Restaurant. “Not my customers, anyway.”

Although sharks can still be fished for meat, a difficult preparation process means demand from fishermen tends to be low, said Christopher Chin, executive director of the San Francisco-based Center for Oceanic Research, Awareness, and Education.

So those who enjoy other shark entrees need not worry about a fin ban, Chin said.

“Because that one piece is more valuable than anything else, that’s what the animal is sought for,” he said. “So if people want to have shark steak, they can continue to do that, this doesn’t really address that.”

Feigenholtz said she is not sure the bill will make it out of committee, but added “I think that any legislation that doesn’t cost anything could move.”

“We’ll see where it goes. Sometimes it flies, sometimes it dies. That’s the nature of the business.”