

[Jupp Baron Kerckerinck zur Borg](#)

President, Shark Research Institute

## Shark Fin Legislation -- Long Overdue

Posted: 02/24/2012 5:12 pm

Shark fin soup was initially served in China as a symbol of great wealth; shark fins were rarely available and so the soup was a luxury dish. Development of modern fishing methods such as long-lining increased the bycatch (accidental catch) of sharks dramatically, and the shark fin industry was created. Shark fin soup ceased to be a dish of the aristocracy and became a status symbol among Asia's rising middle class. As many as 70 million sharks are now being slaughtered, mostly for their fins. As a result, in just a few decades some shark populations have declined by 99 percent!

Why do we care? Because sharks play important roles in maintaining balance in the oceans, and the shark fin trade has put some shark species on a fast track to extinction.

Much of the shark fin trade uses fins hacked off of living sharks. "If we found dogs and horses with their legs severed, bleeding and dying, the public outrage would be deafening. The difference is that finning often takes place at sea, out of sight," says Marie Levine, Executive Director of SRI.

"A number of countries have banned shark finning in their waters," says Steve Nagiewicz, Board Chairman of SRI and former Executive Director of the Explorers Club. "Countries such as Palau, the Maldives, Honduras, Bahamas, and the Marshall Islands protect all species of sharks in their waters. Others such as Taiwan prohibit the finning of sharks, and a number of countries have regulations governing shark finning within their exclusive economic zones." Although shark finning is illegal in United States' waters, federal law doesn't address the shark fin trade itself.

The shark fin trade is largely unregulated and unmonitored. Finning often takes place on the high seas beyond national jurisdictions and fins are imported into the U.S. from countries with few or even no shark protections in place. The most effective method to bring an end to the practice is through legislation prohibiting the trade. To close the loopholes in our federal laws, Hawaii, Washington, Oregon and California have passed laws prohibiting the sale, possession and distribution of shark fins, and five other states have similar legislation pending.

- In Virginia, Delegate Mark Sickles introduced House Bill 1159 which, if enacted, will ban the possession, sale and distribution of shark fins throughout the state.

- In Maryland, HB 393 was introduced by Delegate Eric G. Luedtke in the House, and Senate Bill 465 was introduced by Senator Brian Frosh in the Senate. The proposed bill contains fines from \$5,000 for a first offense and to \$50,000 for repeat offenders.

- In Illinois, HB 4119, a measure to ban the possession, sale, trade, and distribution of shark fins in the state of Illinois, has been proposed by State Representative Sara Feigenholtz. If passed, the bill will go into effect in July 2013.

- In New York State, legislators Alan Maisel, Linda B. Rosenthal and Grace Meng are sponsoring a bill to ban the sale, possession and distribution of shark fins. Meng, who represents the heavily Asian district of Flushing, Queens, and who is the only Asian-American in the Assembly, feels so strongly about the bill that she signed on as one of its sponsors. She says that while it will be an adjustment for some in the Asian community, "it is important to be responsible citizens."

- In New Jersey, Senator Christopher Bateman submitted a similar bill banning the sale and possession of shark fins. "It simply is the right thing to do," he said.

Few dispute that finning is brutal and cruel, but there are other good reasons to ban the trade in fins. A third of fins collected in China, Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan which were tested had high levels of mercury in excess of World Health Organization standards.

This week, results of a study conducted by the University of Miami were released which show alarming accumulations of BMAA neurotoxins in shark fins, a neurotoxin linked to neurodegenerative diseases in humans including Alzheimer's and Lou Gehrig Disease (ALS). The study suggests that consumption of shark fin soup and cartilage pills may pose a significant health risk for development of degenerative brain diseases.

"In a perfect world all fishing of sharks would end and shark populations would be allowed to recover. But killing sharks for their fins -- fins that have little nutritional value but contain high levels of mercury and other toxins, fins whose only use are as a tasteless ingredient in a bowl of soup -- is ecologically irresponsible and morally reprehensible," says SRI president Jupp Kerckerinck. "I urge all our members to support the bills now pending, particularly if you live in one of the states in which a shark fin bill has been introduced.

If a shark fin bill has not been introduced, please contact your Assemblymen and senators and ask that they follow suit. Without sharks there will soon not be any healthy coral reefs left. We cannot allow the destruction of our oceans for a soup. The oceans are our life support system.

*Shark Research Institute, Princeton, NJ: Dr. Marie Levine, Executive Director; Steve Nagiewicz, Chairman of the Board; Jupp Baron Kerckerinck zur Borg, President*