

# Shark fin raises concerns far from the ocean

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By Sophia Tareen, Associated Press

CHICAGO (WTW) — Like at other herb shops in Chinatown, the glass jars lining shelves at Yin Wall City offer floral teas, shitake mushrooms and a seafood product that looks strangely like dried corn husks and sparks controversy even hundreds of miles from the ocean.

Shark fin is a pricey delicacy used to make soup considered a status symbol at Chinese social gatherings. But environmentalists say that harvesting sharks just for their fins is inhumane and a threat to shark populations, and they have brought their campaign against it to Illinois, which could become the latest state — and the first inland — to ban its possession.

Chicago's Chinatown, among the largest nationwide, is a hub for the sale and consumption of shark fin in the Midwest, lawmakers say. However, evidence in the neighborhood — reduced demand and restaurateurs' support for outlawing shark fin — may reflect waning appetite as environmental concerns increase. Advocates say a state measure would add momentum to the movement to prohibit it worldwide, including in China.

Good luck finding a bowl for lunch in Chinatown, a dense South Side neighborhood of restaurants and bulk goods shops with its own museum, library branch and gardens along the Chicago River. Shark fin soup is listed on the menu at several restaurants, but chefs don't keep it on hand because it's expensive, takes days to prepare and is so rarely ordered that it would go to waste.

Morgan Ng, the manager at Triple Crown, one of the largest restaurants, said he'll leave the \$18.95-a-bowl dish off new menus when they come out this year. Bring up shark fin soup back in the kitchen and the chefs groan.

"It's a hassle for them," said Ng. "We're happy this (ban) was brought up."

Dried shark fin, most commonly sold in long, thick triangles at bulk stores, costs from \$300 to nearly \$900 a pound, depending on the variety. Annie Wu, a bookkeeper at Yin Wall City, said a customer buys it at her shop perhaps once a month. It's sold elsewhere for less in other forms: A Springfield Asian grocery sells canned shark fin soup for \$5 a can, and a Rockford market sells a 7-ounce package for \$40.

Bans on the delicacy have passed in California, Washington, Oregon and Hawaii, and a few East Coast states are mulling it. In Illinois, the issue was raised by the Center for Oceanic Awareness, Research, and Education and The Humane Society.

"Although we are not surrounded by oceans," said State Rep. Sara Feigenholtz, a Chicago Democrat sponsoring the ban, "we are connected to this as an environmental issue."

She has introduced legislation that passed with an overwhelming majority in the Illinois House and awaits a Senate vote.

In China, the practice of eating shark fin soup goes back several hundred years, according to Theodore Foss, a director at the University of Chicago's Center for East Asian Studies. Once considered upper-class food, it has become more common as the standard of living has increased and, like champagne, remains a status symbol at weddings and business meetings.

Clerks at Chinatown stores tout shark fin for healthy bones, livers, hearts and virility, though there's little Western scientific research to support the claims. Shark fin meat — cooked so long it takes on a stringy texture — is bland when eaten by itself, so it's often sprinkled with crab meat or ham.

In recent years, a widespread public awareness campaign has been mounted against harvesting shark fin, which is difficult to regulate because of its global scale. Finless sharks either die right away from the injury or are left to die an agonizing death without the ability to swim.

Few hard statistics are available when it comes to shark fin consumption. Advocacy groups and scientists estimate that somewhere between 26 million and 74 million sharks a year are harvested for their fins, while shark populations are dwindling.

Activists believe that each additional ban in the U.S. has an impact in China, and that an Illinois ban, just as Chicago officials are working to improve ties with the Chinese, would be especially meaningful. Last year, Chicago courted Chinese President Hu Jintao and other dignitaries in an effort to boost economic ties between the world's second-largest economy and Midwest companies.

"It all helps to legitimize the idea that people shouldn't be consuming it," said Peter Knights, executive director of WildAid, an environmental group that enlisted retired NBA star Yao Ming to speak out on the issue.

Not everyone agrees.

Talk of fin soup brings up fond memories for Anthony Yu, a 73-year-old retired professor and self-professed foodie who grew up in China but has lived for decades in Chicago. "I have eaten it since I was a baby," he said. "It is a very, very much treasured delicacy."

Last year, for his wife's 70th birthday, he treated her to a \$100-a-bowl meal. He said he understands the environmental concerns, but thinks a ban might cross a fine line into encroaching on one's culture. He prefers a middle ground, such as more regulation to protect sharks.

In Chinatown, business owners say they're already gearing up for a ban. One of the neighborhood's biggest business owners, Tony Hu, says he serves it at only one of his five restaurants but is leaving it off new menus.

David Hoy, a manager at Won Kow Restaurant, hopes someone orders the dish so he can finish off his last little bit in stock. At another dried goods store, a clerk said she's ready to sell shark extract pills instead, at just \$6 a bottle. And Xiao Ming, 49, who studies Chinese medicine and was buying herbs last week, said he no longer eats it.

"It's a universal concern for the environment," he said.

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