

Shark fin raises concerns far from the ocean

By [SOPHIA TAREEN](#) | Associated Press

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Morgan Ng, manager of Triple Crown Restaurant in Chicago's Chinatown neighborhood, poses at his restaurant Wednesday, May 2, 2012. Ng is one of many people in the restaurant industry that are in favor of the Illinois General Assembly's move to ban the possession of shark fins. Ng says he hasn't kept shark fins in stock for months and when the new menus come out this year, they'll leave off the \$18.95-a-bowl dish. Bring up shark fin soup back in the kitchen and chefs groan. (AP Photo/M. Spencer Green)

CHICAGO — 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 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.

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. 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.” Her legislation to ban shark fin passed with an overwhelming majority in the Illinois House and awaits a Senate vote.

Status symbol

In China, the practice of eating shark fin soup goes back several hundred years, said Theodore Foss, a director at the University of Chicago’s Center for East Asian Studies. Once considered upper-class food, it’s 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 between 26 million and 74 million sharks a year are harvested for their fins, while shark populations are dwindling.

Activists believe 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.

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 \$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.