

Bay Area Divers

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more than £10,000 (\$14,500). About 64,700 pounds of shark fins were seized after federal agents boarded the Honolulu-based King Diamond II in the year 2002 about 350 miles southwest of Mexico—the largest seizure of shark fins in the United States since the federal law was passed in 2000.

NOAA estimated about 18,000 sharks were killed for 32 tons of shark fins, most of them blue sharks. If the shark fins weighted 32 tons the rest of the shark carcass would've weighed 1.2 million. There's just no way you can take possession of the many shark carcasses. Companies in Hawaii and Hong Kong were charged with illegally possessing more than 32 tons of shark fins and fined hundreds of thousands of dollars.

So what lands in the dock in Honolulu and other ports around the world are piles of fins. Shark landings in Hawaii have jumped by more than 20-fold, from 2,289 in 1991 to 60,856 in 1998. And 99 percent of those "sharks" arrived at the dock solely as fins in 1998.

Large schools of the bizarre-looking hammerhead shark are part of the magical allure of world heritage marine parks such as the Galapagos Islands and Cocos Island off Costa Rica. But the few places where it is still possible to see such wildlife spectacles are also increasingly under threat from the burgeoning commercial shark industry. The demand for shark fins as an expensive delicacy has led to the growth of illegal fishing even in precious marine reserves like Galapagos and Cocos. Eliecer Cruz, director of the Galapagos National Park Services, said: "The illegal fishing for shark fins in the Galapagos has increased dramatically in the past few years. "It's very profitable and has created a mafia here. But it is very difficult to stop and it can cause corruption in our institutions" According to WildAid, about 100 million sharks are killed every year in a trade which it likens to the scandal of the slaughter of elephants for their ivory.

Many scientists and conservationists fear the burgeoning demand many be decimating shark populations worldwide, with potentially serious consequences for marine ecosystem. Sharks are vulnerable because they grow and mature slowly, have long gestations periods, and produce only a handful of young at a time. Most take 10 years or more to mature, carry their pups inside their bodies for months at a time, and have live births.

Sharks hand had a bad press for decades, and there are those who believe the "only good shark is a dead shark". But they are a vital part of the food chain, keeping the world's oceans in check. "Solutions will come only from learning more about sharks, reducing fishing pressure, stopping unnecessary catches, monitoring shark fishing and trade, and more effective enforcement of regulations" he said.

Sharks are "just not biologically equipped to take sustained fishing pressure," says Sonja Fordham, a shark specialist at the Center for Marine Conservation in Washington. "Their populations collapse, and it takes decades for them to recover."

An irony today is that a live shark in the wild can be worth thousands of dollars to the booming tourist trade in diving. Gradually people are realizing that to share a close encounter with these remarkable animals is difficult to put a price on.

