



WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS: AARON GEKOSKI

# SHIVERS OF SHARKS!

Our man dives deep into the murky waters of the shark-fin  
finning industry to reveal how lust for status is robbing  
our oceans of its top predator... >





**'WE'RE WAY MORE LIKELY TO BE KILLED BY OUR CHRISTMAS TREE LIGHTS OR TOASTERS THAN SHARKS'**

**A**s I relentlessly puke all over myself, my camera and the giant shark that lies dying on top of me, I cast my mind back to my previous life. Just six months ago I was the owner of a model agency in London, many of the hotties on our books gracing the pages of this very magazine. I attended glitzy parties, dated beautiful women with pert, perfect figures and drank champers from the cup of life. I made good money, drove a sports car and lived in a great pad.

But here I am lying in a tiny fishing vessel, covered in dead eels (bait), as litres of shark blood gush over my face and body. There isn't a blonde belter or even a glass of bubbly in sight. And I'm being paid R120 a day.

The shark on top of me has just been hacked at with a machete and is taking its last breaths, leaving me to ponder the sanity of my new career path.

But as its cavernous eyes twitch, disbelievably, as if it wishes it had the ability to scream, I remember why I am here. Soon, there may not be any of these magnificent creatures left in our oceans at all.

You'd have to have been living on Mars – with your head buried in a deep, red crater – to be unaware of the world's shark crisis... But let's recap anyway. Globally, sharks are being hunted for the oil in their livers, their cartilage, teeth, skin and flesh. But due to the demand from a soup-hungry south-east Asia, it is their fins that have become the prized possession. One kilo of shark fin fetches as much as \$700 on the Hong Kong market. This trade, aided by an increase in the kinds of fishing machinery and fishing techniques, has ensured that 90 per cent of large predatory fish have been eradicated in the past 50 years.

Most have been engulfed by vast gill or trawl nets, or snared by one of the 1,4 billion hooks that are laid annually, on lines long enough to encircle the globe 550 times. These methods have led to an estimated three sharks per second being slaughtered – many of which are finned alive, then dumped back into the sea. There, still breathing, they are either eaten by predators or suffocate to death. Either way, it's a gruesome end.

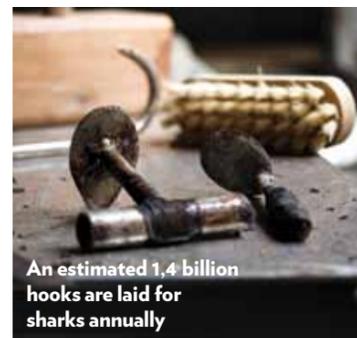
#### THE COSTS OF CULTURE

Shark finning is massive business in south-east Asia, with links to Chinese organised crime. The industry is worth an estimated \$500 million a year, with Hong Kong the world's leading player, importing 100 000 tons of shark fin last year from 83 countries.

With China's economy growing rapidly, a 1,3 billion-strong population now has the money to buy their ultimate delicacy: shark-fin soup. In



Many sharks are finned alive, before being dumped back into the sea



An estimated 1,4 billion hooks are laid for sharks annually



China, along with other Asian nations, serving shark-fin soup at important events is a reflection of the host's wealth, social status and impeccable taste. The irony is that shark fin itself has little taste and the gristly texture actually ruins an otherwise perfectly good chicken broth. In order to meet the demand for this chewy brew of nastiness, Africa's once shark-rich waters have been pillaged to near mass extinction. And the price our continent charges for the rape of our oceans? The lined pockets of corrupt government officials and maybe a few new schools or roads.

While much of this infrastructure is much needed, it comes at a cost: 30 per cent of shark species are now listed as threatened – many of them critically. Tiger shark populations have fallen by 97 per cent and black-tip sharks by 93 per cent. At this rate, our seas could contain no sharks in as little as 10 to 20 years.

Having sold my model agency to pursue a childhood dream of becoming

a marine David Attenborough, I found myself in Mozambique – a dream, incidentally, that didn't involve wallowing in my own vomit while cuddling a dying shark. I'd washed up in Tofo, a little slice of heaven, its sea a delicious soup of gigantic, plodding whale sharks, UFO-like manta rays and vocal humpback whales. And I was in luck; a local film crew were about to start work on *Shiver*, a documentary on Mozambique's very own shark-fin crisis. (Coincidentally, "shiver" is also the collective noun for a group of sharks).

#### POISONED CHALICE

I was told that shark camps were cropping up all over Mozambique's coastline; a strange fact, given it's not in Mozambique's culture to target sharks. But in a country where the average monthly wage is only R700, you can't lay the blame at their feet. Traditional catch is plummeting due to overfishing, and demand for shark fin is rising. Fishermen are being paid

well to provide middlemen with dried shark fin. The rest of the shark, rather than being thrown overboard, is now forming a key part of the national diet. People need protein-rich food.

However, there's one major problem with eating shark meat: it's riddled with dangerous toxins. As the ocean's top predator, a shark will shun very few fish: tuna, bass, mackerel, sailfish and marlin are all on the menu. But straddling the top of the food chain is not without its disadvantages.

Large predatory fish, such as tuna, absorb significant amounts of toxins and heavy metals into their system, including lead and mercury. The toxin of most significance to humans, though, is methylmercury, one of the most biologically active and dangerous to humans.

This poison is particularly lethal for pregnant women, as it accumulates in the embryo's developing brain and other vital organs. This can lead to all manner of problems in the nervous system, as well as kidney failure. And, in extreme cases, brain damage.

During filming we took a meat sample from a large Zambezi shark, which we sent to Johannesburg, where it was analysed for toxins. The results blew our minds.

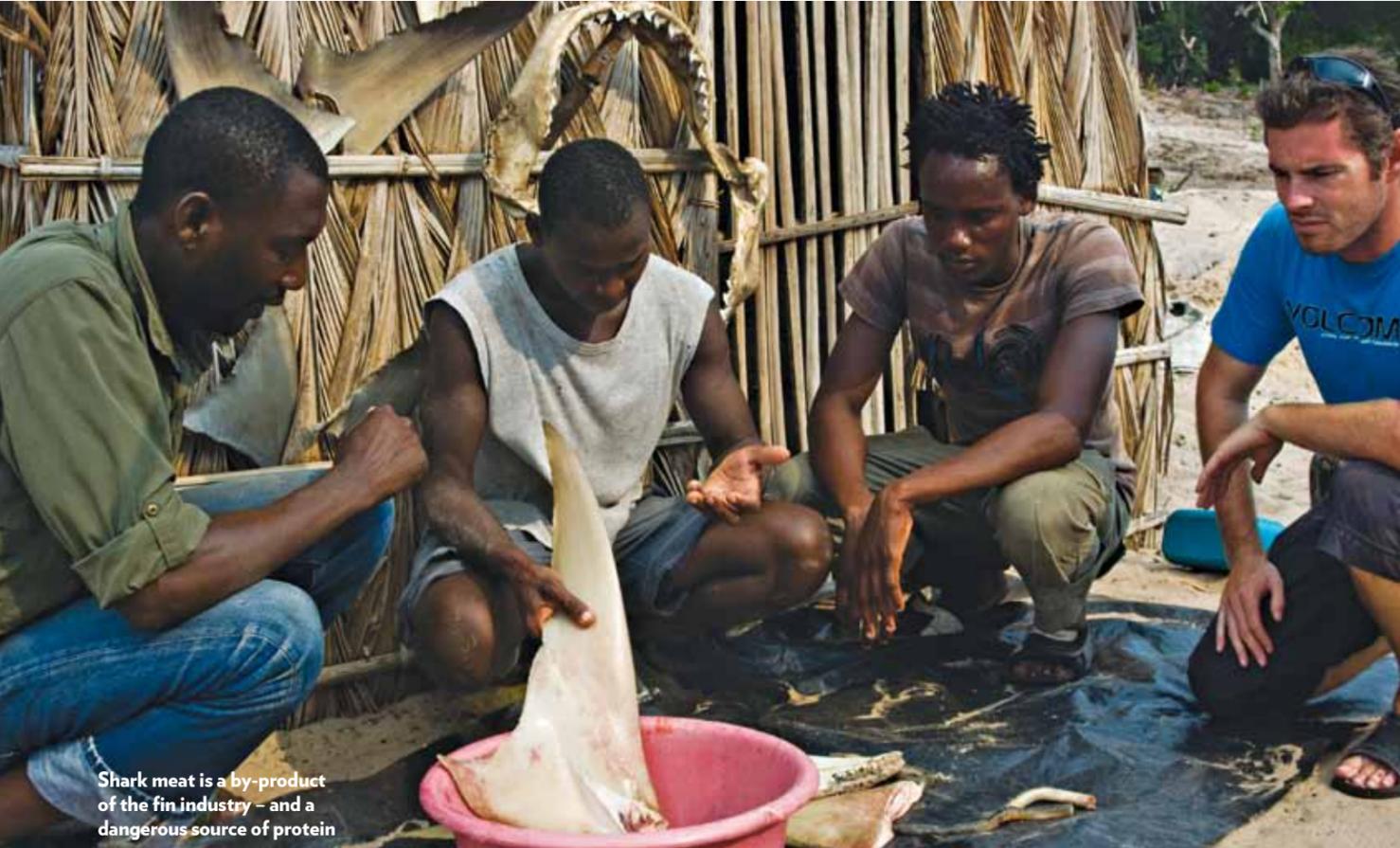
A 300g serving of meat from a Zambezi shark would contain over 5 500 per cent of our safe daily intake of methylmercury. By targeting sharks for their fins and the subsequent consumption of the meat, Mozambique's fishermen are unknowingly poisoning themselves, >

#### FIN FACTS

True or false?

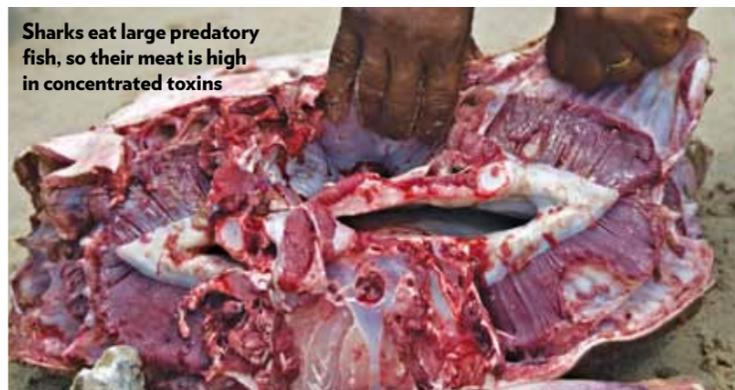
- 1 A shark's dorsal fin is actually a bone
- 2 All sharks have a dorsal fin
- 3 A shark's dorsal fin helps it to swim upright

1. False. (It comprises cartilage.)
2. False. (Not all sharks have dorsal fins.)
3. True. A shark's dorsal fin allows it to make sharp turns and manoeuvre itself in the water.



Shark meat is a by-product of the fin industry – and a dangerous source of protein

Tourism already plays a key role in shark protection



Sharks eat large predatory fish, so their meat is high in concentrated toxins

their families and future generations. Removing an apex predator is a pretty dumb thing to do. Imagine the human race being systematically destroyed over a relatively short space of time and the ecological mayhem that would ensue. The marine world is no different. Take this case in the North Atlantic, a typical example of how finely balanced marine ecosystems can be tipped. From the Eighties to the late Nineties, the region's virtual elimination of sharks resulted in an increase in cownose rays, which the sharks typically preyed on. Now, cownose rays love to munch on scallops – so the resulting feasting decimated scallop populations and put many local fisheries out of business.

Currently, we find our oceans in a right old mess. Sea temperatures are rising due to global warming, causing coral beds to disperse with the polyps that provide their kaleidoscope of colours. Our oceans are

unceremoniously used as a dumping ground for the vast quantities of waste that we produce. And they're being emptied of fish, their life force.

### UNWARRANTED HYSTERIA

The good news is that although it would take decades for our seas to recover, it isn't too late to do something about it. But a lot relies on education and changing attitudes that have been formed over generations.

While some countries, such as many Pacific Islands, attach a mythical significance to sharks, the West has typically viewed them with fear. The media's portrayal of sharks has done untold damage to their reputation. Steven Spielberg's 1975 film *Jaws*, which was no doubt a money-making endeavour, merely served to sensationalise the shark and whip up unwarranted hysteria. A slap in the face of common sense, statistics and science, irresponsible

### THE SA SCENE

In South Africa, the processing, sale and trade of almost all marine resources are regulated under the Marine Living Resources Act of 1998. According to the rules, permits are needed to land, transport, ship or dispose of sharks with their fins removed. There are no commercial catch restrictions in place with regards to shark species caught in South African waters.

television programmes keep coming... "The world's deadliest man eater!", "The ultimate killing machine!", accompanied by scary music and images of sharks, erm... swimming fast and eating stuff. The message is clear: sharks are ruthless killing machines that like nothing more than to snack on a good human.

But as anyone with an interest in sharks will tell you, we're way more likely to be killed by our Christmas tree lights or toasters than by a shark.

The shark is associated with violence, blood and, ultimately, death. Sharks don't sing soulfully or nurture their young, like whales. They don't waddle and bark comically like seals.

The shark is solitary, has questionable maternal instincts and sports a fearsome appearance that has been finely honed over the past 400 million years. But nowhere in our deserts, fields, ice plains or vast expanses of ocean does such evolutionary perfection exist.

Currently the future of Mozambique's sharks looks grim. But Mozambique is a country with limited funds and resources and only one patrol vessel to monitor nearly 3 000km of coastline. The answer to protecting their sharks, however, could lie in tourism.

Much could be learnt from neighbouring South Africa. It's estimated that great white tourism brings in between \$10 and 15 million every year. While some people may criticise cage diving, claiming it contributes to sharks associating

INPRA



'THOSE LUCKY ENOUGH TO HAVE STARED ONE OF THESE MIGHTY BEASTS IN THE EYE HAVE COME AWAY WITH RESPECT FOR ONE OF EARTH'S MOST FLAWLESS CREATURES'

### KINGS OF THE DEEP

### FAMOUS FINS!

On a lighter note, these have led to no shark deaths at all...

#### HUCKLEBERRY FINN

Tom Sawyer's mate. Doesn't like baths, devout widows or slavery.

#### KIMI RÄINKÖNEN

Perhaps the most famous Finn of all. F1 World Drivers Champion in 2007, he now drives in the World Rally Championship. And forces font designers to make provision for umlauts...



#### 1959 CADILLAC ELDORADO TAIL FIN

Inspired by fighter aircraft, the car tail fin took off in the Fifties. Manufacturers would claim they "improved stability", but really, oaks were into the look. The 1959 Cadillac represented the peak of the fashion – with something straight out of *The Jetsons!*

#### HENRY FRANCIS FYNN

British trader who set up shop in Port Natal. The first white man to meet King Shaka, his medical skills came in handy when the king survived an assassination attempt. Was considered an authority on Zulu culture, but modern historians take many of his "facts" with a pinch of salt. At least he had Fynnland (on Durban's Bluff) named after him...

#### FINN HUDSON

The football-playing choir member from *Glee*. You see? *FHM* really does have gay friends...

#### THE END OF ANY LA LINEA CARTOON

Or any French art movie, come to think of it...



The future of Mozambique's sharks looks grim

