



SHARK FIN SOUP, ANYONE?

SOON WE COULD BE CONTEMPLATING LIFE WITHOUT A CREATURE THAT HAS ROAMED OUR OCEANS FOR 450 MILLION YEARS AND SURVIVED FIVE MASS EXTINCTIONS, SAYS AARON GEKOSKI

As you read this, the fastest, most sustained killing of any group of animals in the history of time is taking place. In Asia, shark-fin soup is viewed as a delicacy and is served at business functions and prestigious events. Consuming the soup is the ultimate sign of good taste yet, ironically, the fin's cartilaginous needles add only texture, not flavour, to chicken broth. And fuelled by China's rampant economy and growing middle class, its consumption is on the rise.

In order to meet this insatiable demand, coastal African nations – like many poor and developing countries – are being ruthlessly targeted. Up and down our continent, industrial fishing operations, functioning as nameless, faceless vessels, are plundering these oceans of their life force.

For those sharks that avoid capture on the high seas' vast lines of baited hooks, a new threat awaits. For the first time, many rural African fishing communities are targeting these species. Over recent years, fishermen have been given the resources and incentives to catch sharks. They catch them because they have to, not because they want to. In Mozambique, local fishermen make

far more money selling fins than they would by traditional fishing. This much needed revenue will support a whole family in regions where alternative sources of income are limited. Many of these fishing communities lie in inaccessible regions, on infertile land incapable of cultivating crops. They rely on the ocean for sustenance.

With food so precious here, the shark carcasses do not go to waste. The meat has become the primary source of protein for these communities. Tragically, this meat is laden with the deadly toxin methylmercury, which affects the central nervous system and is particularly dangerous to pregnant women. In short, by targeting sharks, these communities are unwittingly poisoning themselves, their families and their next generations.

The future for Mozambique's sharks looks grim. They are offered very little protection by the government, which possesses just one patrol vessel to monitor nearly 2 500 kilometres of coastline. And without its apex predators, these finely balanced marine ecosystems – which local communities rely so heavily upon – are on the verge of collapse. Removing sharks from our oceans has dire consequences for us all.

*Aaron Gekoski has just finished filming *Shiver* (a joint Moz Images/Sangue Bom Production), a documentary on Mozambique's shark-fishing crisis. To watch it, go to www.aarongekoski.com. The filmmakers are in the process of shooting an international version of the film. For more details, email info@aarongekoski.com.*