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Predator in the soup

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Demand for traditional shark fin delicacy cuts into worldwide supply

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Sharks, an icon of the ocean for more than 400 million years, are everywhere in alarming retreat -- by some estimates, down as much as 80% from only decades ago in certain regions. Millennia of evolutionary refinement may have produced the world's supreme predator, but it has not prepared the shark for the onslaught the species is now enduring.

Why? Soup.

As thousands of Asian-Canadians welcomed the dawn of the new lunar year last week over traditional dinners with family and friends, shark fin soup was sure to figure prominently on the menu of many of the celebrations.

On Spadina Avenue, in the heart of Toronto's Chinatown just west of the luminous towers crowding Bay Street, sits the Bright Pearl, a 450-seat authentic Chinese seafood emporium.

Shark fin soup isn't among the Pearl's regular offerings, but it was available from the special New Year's menu the restaurant prepared recently. May Chen, manager of the restaurant, says the delicacy, usually reserved for special occasions, is a popular one among Toronto's sizeable Chinese community.

The soup contains shards of the tasteless, and nutritionally worthless, shark fin and is usually flavoured with chicken stock.

The cost: \$55. It is the price of prestige.

The range of theories that feed the soup's enduring allure include the rarity of the main ingredient, a desire for the perceived health-boosting qualities of an animal seen as being unsusceptible to poor health, and even libido enhancement. The shark fin is seen as an aphrodisiac in the same way as rhinoceros horns have been traditionally prized, in that they are seen as evidence of humans tapping into the ferocity of a powerful animal.

What has only increased the appetite, and the cost, of the soup is the tightening supply.

"There's no question there is an increase in demand for shark fin around the world," says Glenn Sant, senior biologist for Traffic, a sister organization of the World Wildlife Fund that attempts to

monitor the trade.

He says that between 2002 and 2005 -- the latest figures available -- the total recorded shark catch climbed 30% to more than 95,500 tons valued at more than US\$310-million.

By volume, fins comprised a scant 7%, but accounted for over 40% of the value.

The biggest consumers are in Hong Kong and mainland China, Mr. Sant says, where the soup is a prized symbol of wealth, something more and more Chinese are attaining.

Jan. 26 marked the start of the Year of the Ox, the second sign of the Chinese zodiac, representing prosperity and wealth through hard work.

The growth of an Asian leisure class has put immense pressure on shark stocks that are already poorly understood and managed, says Dr. Dirk Zeller, a research fellow at the University of British Columbia Fisheries Centre.

"In terms of tons, the median estimate is 1.7 million a year of sharks being caught worldwide," he says, citing a 2006 study.

The explosion of new wealth has also given rise to a colossal black market.

"It's a huge grey figure" between the recorded catch and what goes unreported or illegally poached, Dr. Zeller says.

The estimated kill annually is now between 38 million and 100 million, he says, the most sought after being blue, hammerhead and shortfin sharks.

Humane Society International expanded its nascent anti-finning campaign into Canada this month, launching its program in Toronto and Vancouver, the two cities that boast the largest Chinese communities in Canada.

"Most retailers and consumers we have spoken with don't really know that there is a problem," says Shu-Jen Chen, a campaign manager in Washington, D. C., who says she was turned off the delicacy after learning about the illegal trade.

"To me," she says, "it was just a bowl of soup."