

Apex Predators: Encounters with Sharks since 1900

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My current book project examines the global environmental, cultural, and economic history of human interactions with sharks. Tentatively titled *Apex Predators: Encounters with Sharks since 1900* (under contract with Harvard University Press), this work investigates how human diets and global trade networks have driven the worldwide decline of shark populations throughout the twentieth century, provoking local extinction in some instances and producing cascading trophic collapses. In the process of documenting this ecological story, I have uncovered the material and social consequences of changes in the popular perceptions of sharks from “mindless killing machines” to integral components of ecosystems. This transition offers insights into broader shifts in international attitudes towards oceans, nature, and predators.

The central argument of this book has only emerged after completing archival research on five continents and starting to write. When it comes to human-shark interactions, the prevailing orthodoxy—espoused in documentary films, popular literature, and scientific writing—holds that global shark populations have plummeted since the 1980s as a consequence of increasing purchasing power in China with the traditional dish of shark fin soup. While this interpretation is to some extent true, it is at the same time incomplete and overly simplistic.

I argue that the focus on the cultural practice of shark fin soup, a discussion that often leads into Orientalist diatribes against supposed Asian ignorance of animal welfare, obscures much more profound structural issues that presently threaten global shark populations with extinction. Most saliently, individuals within capitalist societies have aspired to convert sharks into commodities for well over a century. Whether we examine the global shark leather industry of the early twentieth century, the shark liver oil boom during World War II, or ongoing attempts to overcome public distaste for shark meat (often through misleading labeling), people have sought to transform shark body parts into dollars (and to simultaneously rid the oceans of the “shark menace”) for as long as the equipment for harvesting them in large numbers has existed. All the way through, Western entrepreneurs have dreamt of opening China as an outlet for shark fins and encouraged what is arguably a recently invented tradition of shark fin consumption in China. Hence, I contend that the trouble is not so much the cultural practice of shark fin soup but rather a broader capitalist relationship to the ocean that frantically endeavors to commoditize every organism of it, even if the long-term corollary of such actions will inevitably be the collapse of the system.