

*Apex Predators: Encounters with Sharks since 1900*

*Miles Powell*

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* (Harvard UP, under contract), this work examines how human diets and global trade networks have driven the worldwide decline of shark populations in the twentieth century, threatening local extinctions in some instances, and producing cascading trophic collapses. In the process of documenting this ecological story, I have also uncovered the material and social consequences of changes in 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 only became apparent after I had completed archival research on five continents and begun writing. 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 and that nation’s peculiar preference for shark fin soup. While there is some truth to this interpretation, it is incomplete and overly simplistic.

I assert that this focus on the cultural practice of shark fin soup, a fixation that often devolves into Orientalist diatribes against supposed Asian disregard for animal welfare, obscures much more profound structural issues that presently threaten global shark populations with annihilation. 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 seas of the “shark menace”) for as long as the equipment to harvest them in large numbers has existed. Throughout all of this, Western entrepreneurs have dreamt of opening China as an outlet for shark’s fins, and encouraged the broader adoption in that nation of what is arguably a recently-invented tradition of widespread shark fin consumption. Hence, I contend, the trouble is not so much the cultural practice of shark fin soup, but rather a broader capitalist relationship to the seas that frantically endeavors to commoditize every organism within them, even if the long-term corollary of such actions is inevitable systemic collapse.