

Dead Sharks Encourage No-Fishing Zones

By Doug Olander



hanging up big, dead sharks fosters a public perception of recreational fishing as a sport of greed and carnage and plays right into the hands of concerned, hard-core green groups trying to close off the ocean to angling.

For this reason, it was gratifying to learn recently that the International Game Fish Association is considering a proposal — submitted by IGFA board member Guy Harvey — to stop keeping world records for tiger sharks and great hammerheads.

Also, Gray's Taxidermy, one of the largest providers of fish mounts, has finally announced that it would no longer accept sharks or any parts of them for fish mounts, finally joining some other progressive taxidermists who years ago began making only fiberglass-replica mounts. Charter skippers who work with Gray's have lost one excuse to kill sharks.

It seems that the pendulum among sport fishermen continues to swing gradually toward not killing large sharks. But it has a long way to go. Among charter skippers and some private boaters, there remains the sentiment that killing an occasional large shark is insignificant in the scheme of things and that as long as the only fish killed are taken legally, doing so bears no shame. In fact, there are most assuredly those (both among recreational fishermen and the general public) who feel the only good shark is a dead shark.

I admit I'm not one of those sharing that mentality. I applaud shark-free marinas for their efforts. Ditto anglers who carry cameras and, should they wrestle in a huge shark, take home photos of the great fish boat-side — before its successful release. Those who find it profitable to hang up dead sharks may help their income in the short term but, in the long term, can only hurt everyone else who loves the sport of fishing.



GROUP PUSHES MARINAS TO GO “SHARK-FREE” (CBS4 News, Miami, May 22, 2009)

That news item caught my attention when I saw it online. It's no secret that many species of large sharks are in varying degrees of trouble worldwide. The primary culprit is the by-now infamous practice of finning — hacking off the fins of sharks (often while they're still alive) and tossing the body

back to sink and decompose on the ocean floor.

The practice has been widely banned but (a) not before many shark stocks were severely impacted; (b) it's still legal in many areas; and (c) it's still widely practiced (in largely uncontrolled waters) where it's not legal.

The motivation for the barbaric and wasteful practice is an old one: greed.

Shark fins bring relatively big bucks on the Asian market: think shark-fin soup. A few pounds of fins are worth more than a few hundred pounds of shark meat — and even a small boat can bring in a lot of fins, representing tons of dead sharks.

Recent estimates have put that tonnage of sharks killed each year for their fins as high as 100 million; however, a recent study suggests a figure of about 38 million tons. Either way, it bodes ill for these ecologically vital apex predators.

In this context, it's interesting to see the formation of the nonprofit group Shark-Free Marinas (www.sharkfree.com), intent on “reducing worldwide shark mortality” by persuading marinas to sign on with a pledge to prohibit the landing of any shark.

Of course, the recreational fishery — even at the half-million sharks killed per year by one estimate — represents but a fraction of the worldwide shark-finning massacre. Some might argue that for this very reason, it's pointless to bother even trying to

dissuade anglers from bringing back large sharks to hang up on the scales for a weight and photo or to score points in a shark tournament.

Miami's famous and (more often) infamous skipper, Mark the Shark, might be one who'd make that argument. Well known for encouraging his clients to kill just about any large shark they hook, the ironically self-named skipper claims on his website that thanks to his unequalled expertise on capturing sharks, his dead sharks have “been a great benefit [sic] to science.”

Those trying to convince marinas worldwide to forbid off-loading large dead sharks would say otherwise. Their efforts have a long way to go, but several marinas — in the United States, Bahamas and Fiji — had signed on as of this writing.

Recently, other actions suggest an increasing awareness among the mainstream recreational-fishing community that populations of large, slow-growing sharks are in a tenuous position (with the National Marine Fisheries Service officially considering most species overfished in the Atlantic) and need help. And, of course, in addition to doing what they feel is the right thing, many believe it's the smart thing.

While slaughtering and hanging up dead sharks so a client can get a photo and tourists can gawk may work for Mark the Shark, a broader view is that