

Q & A with Ran Elfassy, Hong Kong's Shark-Rescue Man

Hong Kong is "arguably the global leader in marine habitat destruction," said Elfassy, founder of Shark Rescue (sharkrescue.com) in August 2009. Canadian-born Elfassy worked for the Human Rights Commission in Toronto before moving to Hong Kong six years ago. He wants to use Shark Rescue to make Hong Kong the global leader in shark preservation by 2020.

Do you think Hong Kong is a lost cause when it comes to replenishing its deserted fish stocks and cleaning its polluted waters?

I may be deluded, but I'm an optimist who thinks tomorrow can be better than today. It can, but only if we learn and change behaviour that's taking us in the wrong direction. For too long, Hong Kong has treated its marine territory like it's a huge warehouse, just going in there and taking, taking, taking. Now the warehouse is bare and even toxic. If that wasn't bad enough, Hong Kong is repeating this in reefs and habitats much farther out. I may be kidding myself, but if Hong Kong's leaders make the tough decision to enforce no-catch zones in sizeable areas of its marine territory, there's hope. If Hong Kong can enforce the protection of its marine heritage and let fish populations return and thrive, there's hope.

Why isn't the Hong Kong government doing enough to solve the problems?

It all boils down to leadership, and Hong Kong's government has yet to really show itself as a leader-government. It's certainly true when talking about conservation. Rather than creating policy that looks beyond the interests of a few fishermen and other vested interests, the government stands aside and lets these interests call the shots. Considering the marine territory is now barren compared to its former biodiversity, it's the proof that the SAR's government doesn't have the character of good leadership.

Do you think Hongkongers will ever stop eating shark's fin soup, a local delicacy that is ravaging the world's shark population?

The argument of shark fin as a cultural icon fails on many points — let's not forget that shark fin is just food. Is Hong

Kong's culture one of upholding ignorance in the face of doing what's right? The optimist in me would like to think that Hong Kong has a learning culture.

How bad is the situation for sharks?

Shark fin is especially wicked because its profitability is causing many fishermen the world over to keep the fins and waste the carcasses. Filling a boat up with fins, which represents hundreds of dead sharks, is more profitable than filling a boat's cargo space with far fewer whole-shark carcasses. All of this has pushed many sharks to the brink of collapse, with increasing numbers of species now facing extinction.

Is it true that the ocean's dwindling carnivores, such as sharks and bluefin tuna, are contributing to the increasing plague of jellyfish around the world?

This is all basic biology, or should we say common sense. The oceans can be thought of as a big system of smaller interdependent systems. Messing around with parts of the system in one area is bound to have effects on the system in other areas. Sharp increases in jellyfish are probably an unexpected effect from killing the top predators, like the tuna and sharks. If all of life is interdependent, made up of these finely balanced systems, is it really surprising that we're seeing such unpredictable effects like sudden blooms of jellyfish? As people change the balance of the oceans — be it from killing too many sharks or tuna — we can all expect increasing changes like those of the jellyfish. In the end, we all lose out, not just the sharks or tuna.

China and Canada oppose the bluefin tuna trading ban, as does Japan, bluefin's largest consumer.



Ran Elfassy

Why don't they understand the danger of bluefin tuna extinction, when fishing them out of existence permanently ends their supply of this delicious fish?

Well, it seems that when it comes to business, especially in a world that values consumerism or individual gain, greed is stronger than fear.

In China, Canada, Japan and Hong Kong, the people with the vested interests are the ones with the means to lobby or push through their agendas. The overall effect may be to threaten everyone else, but we live in a world ruled mostly of by "me first". Why don't they understand? Probably because of education. These people simply haven't learned yet that having a healthy biosphere is in our and their interests. They've learned and focused on making money — this is what they think about, this is what they care about. The optimist in me is struggling to keep up. 