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No More Shark-Fin Soup

One environmental NGO's crusade to save the Red Sea pays off in a new law prohibiting shark fishing

By Hadia Mostafa

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The EEAA confiscates a shark caught by fishermen

HEPCA (the Hurghada Environmental Protection and Conservation Association) has become a reckoned with, with the recently issued decree that will finally ban shark fishing in the Red Sea significant victory for the NGO.

"We are making more and more enemies every day. In our business, that's the ultimate sign of Amr Ali, HEPCA's outspoken managing director.

Still basking in the glow of his most recent conquest, which now arms him with the legislative means to put a stop to the dozens of shark massacres that are reported daily throughout Egypt's Red Sea coastline from Hurghada to Marsa Alam, Ali is confident that the fishing and trading of sharks in Egypt will come to an end or at the very least be heavily curtailed.

The Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries decree came with strong backing from the Red Sea National Park's Dr. Mahmoud Hanafy.

"When it comes to environmental violations of any sort it is usually not a problem of a lack of laws but rather contradictions in existing laws that keeps us from being able to move forward," explains Ali.

Shark fishing has, theoretically, been illegal since 1973, when Egypt became one of 100 countries to sign the CITES (Convention of International Trading of Endangered Species) Treaty. Sharks in the Red Sea were on CITES' list of endangered species, but the Egyptian law that regulates fishing made no mention of sharks.

Technically, fishermen who were catching and trading in sharks could not be criminally prosecuted.

According to Ali, the problem began to reach alarming levels in 2000, when divers and conservators noticing a marked decrease in shark populations. The decline in numbers was mainly attributed to the number of fishing boats in the Red Sea. "Fishermen from the Delta were moving into the Red Sea with the territory and its ecosystem, they were employing fishing techniques that were harming the sharks to the corals," says Ali.

This new wave of commercial fishing, coupled with the rise of a handful of trading companies that established solely for the purpose of exporting in-demand seafood delicacies (including sea cucumbers)

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fins) to the Chinese market, were an environmental catastrophe in the making.

"The Red Sea has a very delicate ecosystem. Any disturbance in that system, whether it's a drop of sharks (the top of the food chain) or in the smaller fish that they prey upon, will wreak havoc on most precious natural resources, the coral reef," says diving instructor Sherif Taher.

(For more background on sea-cucumber and shark-fin poaching, see the feature investigation "A/ Destruction" by Cam McGrath, Egypt Today, September 2003.)

"Sharks are a valuable source of revenue for the country. Many people don't realize that tourists spend millions of dollars in the Red Sea because of the sharks. For example, a dive destination like the Brother I coast of Marsa Alam) is sold primarily because of its abundant shark population. It has been estimated that shark fishing in the Red Sea generates approximately 10,000 pounds sterling in income to the country,

It is difficult to quantify Egypt's current shark population and how much it has suffered over the years. The claim that sites near Sharm El-Sheikh and Hurghada that have always been known as prime shark destinations are becoming less and less inhabited with by sharks.

"This is not only the consequence of the lucrative shark fin trade, it also has to do with the overdevelopment of our resorts," says Taher.

The international environmental NGO Greenpeace claims that a whopping 100 million sharks are killed around the world each year. HEPCA has been actively trying to put a stop to the killings in the past five years, but in the absence of a national law there was little that could be done.

The first positive step came in 2004, when Red Sea Governor Gen. Saad Abu Rida ordered a crackdown on shark fishing. He says we need to start catching and fining those responsible for the shark massacres that were occurring on the coast," says Ali. "We were being tipped off by HEPCA members and dive boat captains all over the coast to identify the perpetrators. We would go to the sites and find gruesome scenes of shark carcasses, amputated fins, and up to 20 sharks that were caught in one go. Once we even came across a captured pregnant shark with 12 young shark pups inside her belly," explains Ali.

Fines and penalties of up to LE 100,000 were slapped on fishermen and traders, but clever fishermen were able to maneuver their clients out of paying the penalties on the grounds that the National Fishery Law forbids shark fishing.

Under mounting pressure and lobbying from HEPCA and the Red Sea Governorate, the government issued a decree in August 2005 that officially banned and criminalized shark fishing and trading in Egypt.

"This was a historic decision on the part of Dr. Ezzat Awad, the head of the General Authority for the Development of Fishing Resources," says Ali. "We are very pleased that he has taken such an action to address the environmental problems of the Red Sea. Conservationists worldwide have applauded the decision."

The shark fishing law along with an earlier legislation that was passed to forbid net fishing on coral reefs are considered to be two of the most significant steps forward in the history of Red Sea conservation.

As HEPCA's list of recent victories (including saving Giftun Island and putting a stop to the destruction of the valuable coral reef at the Kahramana Hotel in Marsa Alam) continues to grow, the group is gaining attention as well as local clout. The achievements are remarkable for an organization that originated as a humble group of divers who took it upon themselves to collect money and install 100 mooring buoys in Hurghada.

HEPCA formalized as an NGO in 1992 with USAID funding the further expansion that allowed the project to grow to 460. Today HEPCA, with an annual budget that grew from LE 20,000 in 1996 to LE 1,000,000 in 2004, has installed a total of 1050 buoys.

"We are now even approaching Saudi Arabia and Jordan for possible collaboration on the installation of mooring buoy systems," says Ali. [et](#)

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