

In defence of sharks

FEW ANIMAL SPECIES have been so relentlessly persecuted by humans as sharks. Even before *Jaws*, people held irrational fears about these great predators of the seas. Shark killers are fêted as heroes – ridding the seas of an awful menace.

So it was not surprising that when Forest and Bird's Northern Conservation Officer, Fiona Edwards, recently mounted a protest at the slaughter of sharks for the shark-fin soup trade, some people questioned her sanity. Fiona was incensed at the sight of hundreds of drying shark-fins on the decks of Japanese longliner fishing boats tied up at Auckland's waterfront. Her protest attracted publicity both at home and in Australia – a nation often seized by shark phobia.

Fiona pointed out that sharks are a very slow-growing long-lived fish with a low reproductive rate. They are vulnerable to over-fishing.

"Sharks have survived in the world's oceans for hundreds of millions of years and outlived the dinosaurs. But it must be remembered that until the development of modern bulk fisheries, sharks were not subject to any significant predation," says Fiona. In New Zealand waters, sharks are taken in large numbers as by-catch of longlining for tuna with up to 100,000 sharks caught each year. Up to ten times as many sharks are caught as the supposed target fish bluefin tuna.

Bottom trawlers largely wiped out New Zealand's inshore school shark and rig fisheries during the early 1980s. Recreational fishers say the catch of mako sharks has declined alarmingly and put the blame on the longliners.



Seaman Yasuzu Ito dries out hundreds of shark fins destined for soup during an Auckland stopover on board the fishing boat Daikichi Maru. The fishing practise was criticised by Forest and Bird's northern North Island field officer Fiona Edwards (below right).

Internationally, the shark-fin soup trade places enormous pressure on shark fisheries with the trade exceeding \$240 million per annum. The great white shark is regarded by

Jacques Cousteau as an endangered species.

Fiona's advocacy for the sharks was rubbished by local "experts" who questioned Forest and Bird's credibility. The Ministry of Fisheries' Dr Talbot Murray, who heads the pelagic species unit, said there was "certainly no evidence" to suggest sharks were under threat. Fishing industry spokespersons echoed these claims and accused Forest and Bird of having its priorities wrong. More accurately, they said Forest and Bird's actions amounted to a protest about the "sheer nature of commercial fishing."

One month later, Fiona gained a powerful ally in her lonely crusade for shark conservation. Australia's Environment Minister, Mr Tim Moore, announced that the world's first international shark conference would be held in Sydney early next year prompted by concern over declining shark numbers. Mr Moore said shark numbers were falling worldwide because of overfishing and it was time to "give sharks a fair go."

Around 100 million sharks are harvested from the world's oceans every year, with the fishing level more than doubling in the last five years. Most sharks were killed to supply the Asian shark-fin market.

Mr Moore said it was important to increase public awareness of the need to protect sharks and have facts replace fear and myth. Sharks were as important to marine ecosystems as lions were to the African plains.

Kevin Smith

