

ANIMALS

WHEN THE TABLES ARE TURNED:
Look who is the killing machine now

By Jane Bosveld

When it comes to sympathy for endangered species, the shark is at the bottom of the list. This poster child for terror rarely inspires goodwill. Yet many of the 400 known species of sharks are now endangered, including the infamous great white, the hammerhead, the tiger, and the lemon shark. It isn't hard to guess the greatest threat to these ancient predators that should be able to take care of themselves. The answer, of course, is us.

Human beings slaughter mil-

lions of sharks each year. Fishing boats net thousands of them by accident and, rather than release them, the crews kill them first, then toss their bodies back to the sea to rot. Equally devastating to shark populations is "finning," a practice in which sharks are caught, their fins cut off, and their dying bodies thrown back into the sea. The fins are then dried and sold for use in shark-fin soup and tonics. And to make matters even worse, there is the sheer vanity of sport fishing which adds to the massacre. Scientists who study sharks

have been alarmed for years over the effects such exploitations have on shark populations. They warn of the possible effect depleted shark populations may have on ocean life. Decrease the number of sharks, whose feeding habits help to keep populations of other fish in check, and you offset the balance of aquatic life. "Sharks help control disease in fish populations," explains shark expert Samuel Gruber of the University of Miami. "They play an important role in the evolution of prey species, taking the

sick and unhealthy fish, leaving the more fit to breed." Gruber compares the fate of sharkless oceans to that of the Great Plains after two of its top predators—wolves and mountain lions—were virtually exterminated earlier this century. "The plains stopped being a place where the deer and the antelope played," Gruber explains, "and became a place where the deer and the antelope became sick and overgrazed and destroyed their own habitat. The same thing can happen in the sea."

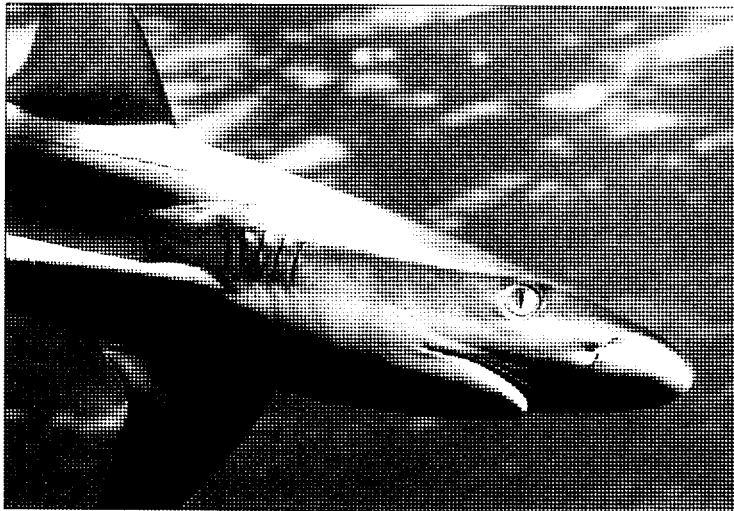
The difficult task Gruber and

other shark experts face is getting the public to care about the fate of creatures they love to hate, or as Gruber puts it, to care about "the death fish from hell." He and scientists have gotten the word out to the U.S. government, but legislation is slow in coming, primarily because there's not enough pressure from the public. The way to get public support, Gruber is convinced, is through education. Once people understand the valuable role sharks play in ocean ecology, he believes, they will realize how important it is to preserve shark populations. Moreover, learning about sharks will put their dastardly deeds in perspective. "More deaths occur each year from elephant attacks, bee stings, crocodiles, and lightning than from shark attacks," Gruber explains. "And that's not to mention car accidents."

But will education be enough? Perhaps what sharks need is their own *Born Free*, an Elsa the Lioness in shark skin. The popularity of Elsa, the pet lioness turned back to the wild, helped to transform the image of lions. No longer could people think of lions as simple ferocious beasts without feeling or memory. The post-*Born Free* view was of intelligent creatures possessed with at least a few humanlike qualities. Gruber believes the same can be done for sharks. He hopes that his collaboration on a BBC documentary about the parental births of one family of sharks may help.

Sympathetic or not, sharks, like all the earth's living creatures, are anything but dispensable. As conservationists and animal-rights advocates work to change the prejudicial nature of the human mind, other animals—perhaps even the sharks—are sure to benefit. **DD**

Outside of Saddam Hussein and Hitler, sharks probably have the worst image problem around—one that is rapidly endangering many of the over 400 extant species.



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