

Season 1, Episode 2 Transcript

The United States Shark Fin Ban

00;00;00;00 - 00;00;18;03

Alena Poulin

Welcome to F.R.Eeeee Lunch, the official podcast of the Food and Resource Economics department at the University of Florida. I'm Alena Poulin, the marketing and communications specialist for the department.

00;00;18;06 - 00;00;32;26

Caleb Stair

And I'm Caleb Stair, assistant instructional professor of food and resource economics and the coordinator for undergraduate research in the department...meaning, I get to interact regularly with the members of our FRE community and see all the cool and interesting topics being explored.

00;00;32;29 - 00;00;44;19

Alena Poulin

That's why we made this podcast! To showcase the many ways students and faculty are using economic research to understand and address the complex issues facing agricultural and natural resource industries.

00;00;44;25 - 00;00;54;01

Caleb Stair

From fins to fisheries, sharks are always a hot topic during these warm months. They are a cultural icon with things like Jaws and Shark Week on TV contributing to their allure.

00;00;54;02 - 00;01;04;09

Alena Poulin

Sharks are a vital part of our ecosystem, and they have fin-tastic adaptations that capture human imagination and solidify their status as apex predators.

00;01;04;11 - 00;01;25;07

Caleb Stair

With over 500 species from the small dwarf lantern shark to the enormous whale shark, there is much curiosity and interest. And as you navigate the waters of shark facts, myths and conservation efforts this

July, it would be hard to miss the topic of finning. Today's bite of information will cover this pressing issue, and the latest US laws surrounding it.

00;01;25;09 - 00;01;37;08

Alena Poulin

Whether you're a fisher, marine biologist, or just someone who thinks that Jaws is a misunderstood hero, we've got something in this episode for everyone. So, what exactly is finning, you ask?

00;01;37;10 - 00;01;49;26

Caleb Stair

Finning is the act of taking a shark, removing its fins, which are the most valuable part of the animal, for sale, and then returning the animal to the water where without its fins, it will be unable to survive.

00;01;49;26 - 00;01;57;08

Alena Poulin

As part of the efforts to halt this practice, the United States has adopted policies which make it illegal to profit from shark fins.

00;01;57;19 - 00;02;07;10

Alena Poulin

This means that when a shark is harvested in the United States, you can only sell the meat from the body. It's required to dispose of the fins completely.

00;02;07;13 - 00;02;30;03

Caleb Stair

To explore how a policy like this could generate change, and some other potential strategies for impacting the demand for sustainable harvesting. We are joined now by Doctor Andrew Ropicki, an assistant professor in FRE specializing in marine resource economics, with both an extension and research appointment. He's also the Florida Sea Grant marine economics specialist. Andrew, thanks for chatting with us today.

00;02;30;05 - 00;02;31;03

Andrew Ropicki

Thank you for having me.

00;02;31;04 - 00;02;39;03

Caleb Stair

So can you explain your research focus, what methodology you use and how did you come to specialize in fisheries management or marine economics?

00;02;39;03 - 00;02;58;04

Andrew Ropicki

So yeah, my research focus as you mentioned is marine resources. So, I spend a lot of time working with fishers and aquaculture, the industries in Florida and the US. Also do some stuff with, you know, marine based tourism and the marine base industry, but mostly fisheries and aquaculture.

00;02;58;06 - 00;03;01;00

Caleb Stair

Do you do a lot of recreational fishing yourself?

00;03;01;02 - 00;03;13;00

Andrew Ropicki

I do, I'm a terrible fisherman. I don't go and fish with any of the commercial guys I know, because they'd probably stop listening to me if they saw me trying to catch a fish. So no, not too much of that.

00;03;13;03 - 00;03;15;12

Alena Poulin

So, you know what they say, those who can't do, research.

00;03;15;16 - 00;03;16;25

Andrew Ropicki

Yeah, exactly.

00;03;17;01 - 00;03;25;27

Alena Poulin

So we're talking about, shark finning and how these laws might impact Florida. What are the sharks that we're seeing caught in U.S. waters?

00;03;26;00 - 00;03;48;18

Andrew Ropicki

You know, it's kind of all over the place here in Florida. When you look at the data prior to the most recent changes in the law, species that were commonly caught included blacktip, sandbar, Atlantic sharp nose, bull, short fin, mako and lemon were some of the ones you'd see frequently in Florida commercial landings.

00;03;48;20 - 00;03;54;06

Alena Poulin

And so what exactly is the practice of shark finning, and why is that something that fishers might be doing?

00;03;54;07 - 00;04;18;28

Andrew Ropicki

So shark finning is a practice of fishing and catching a shark, bringing it aboard and then cutting off and keeping the fins while releasing the shark back into the water. And you know, whether you release it alive or dead, it's going to end up dead. Because without the fins, they're unable to swim effectively. They can basically end up suffocating by not moving through the water or they'll die of blood loss or predation by other species.

00;04;18;29 - 00;04;49;07

Andrew Ropicki

The incentive to do this is, it's an economic one and it's basically there's a large difference in the value between shark fins and shark meat. The rest of the shark, the shark meat, is a very low value product. The shark fins are extremely valuable. Processed and dried shark fin can be worth \$500 to \$700 per pound. And one thing I would say is, while we're talking about finning.... You know, I work extensively with Florida commercial fishers, and I've yet to speak with or meet one that advocates for shark finning.

00;04;49;10 - 00;05;08;24

Andrew Ropicki

Commercial fishers, in my experience, are some of the strongest advocates for efficient use of fishery resources, and they generally hate the idea of wasting the majority of the shark just to harvest the fin. So while they do want to be able to sell that, and it's a high value product, they also want to sell the meat that comes with it.

00;05;08;27 - 00;05;17;01

Caleb Stair

So, you were talking about how this is an economic issue. Do we know anything about the for shark fins, like where they're going, where they're coming from, that sort of thing?

00;05;17;03 - 00;05;55;29

Andrew Ropicki

Yeah, yeah. Stepping back, why do people want shark fins? You know, what's the end product? And the biggest one is it's used to make shark fin soup, which in parts of Asia is associated with wealth and prosperity. And it is consumed at special occasions like weddings, business meetings, things like that. Additionally, shark fin is also used to a much lesser extent in medicinal treatment supplements, cosmetics, things like that. But it's really the shark fin soup that drives the demand. The market data isn't great. We have some trade data associated with this fishery and production for the shark fishery is truly global.

00;05;56;00 - 00;06;27;00

Andrew Ropicki

I mean, there are lots of places around the globe, and what happens is there's minimal processing of the fins where they're first caught, and then they are shipped to Asia, three major centers for trade are Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan. And then they undergo further processing and are either consumed locally or reexported. And, you know, the last few years that we have data for China was the largest importer of fins and Spain was the largest exporter recently.

00;06;27;03 - 00;06;53;25

Andrew Ropicki

The US's role is kind of shrunk due to legislative changes, both at the state and more recently at the federal level. But prior to that, the US was a major supplier of shark fin. So we'd be one of the top ten exporters, generally speaking. One of the other things we know about the market for shark fins, it gets to our problem with finning is that generally the most valuable fins are associated with the larger shark species.

00;06;54;03 - 00;07;13;10

Andrew Ropicki

At the same time, those larger shark species have the lowest shark meat value. So you really compound the problem of that, you know, economic incentive to keep the fin and get rid of the rest of the shark in that, you know, not only is it a bigger shark, but you get less per pound from it.

00;07;13;12 - 00;07;17;12

Caleb Stair

So you were mentioning how maybe the situation has changed, for the US.

00;07;17;12 - 00;07;44;10

Caleb Stair

And this is not exactly the first time that there has been a discussion about laws regarding, the conservation status of sharks, I suppose, since, gosh, Shark Week came around. The general public is more aware of conservation efforts for sharks. I think since 2000, it's been unlawful to possess a shark fin in U.S. waters anyway without the corresponding carcass. And, then in 2010, they now required sharks to be brought ashore with its fins still attached.

00;07;44;15 - 00;07;55;03

Caleb Stair

So it couldn't be separate shark and fin, but we brought them in. It had to be still attached to the shark. Then there's the most recent one in, 2022. How is that one different than those previous two?

00;07;55;05 - 00;08;02;15

Andrew Ropicki

Yeah. So? So like you said, the 2000 ban and the 2010 update had different goals than the most recent one.

00;08;02;17 - 00;08;27;04

Andrew Ropicki

The 2000 ban just made Shark finning illegal. You could not take off the fin and throw the shark back. You had to bring both in and that stopped the practice of finning in the US. And the 2010 change was kind of more of a fishery management thing. It was more wanting for the fishery managers that manage these stocks of sharks in US waters.

00;08;27;04 - 00;08;47;13

Andrew Ropicki

They wanted a better understanding of what was being brought in, and it was kind of hard to piece together the difference. You know, you bring in these fins and you bring in these sharks and what belonged with what. So by requiring them to come in whole, they got a better picture of what was being harvested. Those were designed for better management and stopping finning.

00;08;47;15 - 00;09;11;01

Andrew Ropicki

The 2022 ban isn't a finning ban. It is a fin ban. It makes it illegal to buy or sell shark fins in the US. So we said previously, US fishers, commercial fishers, you know, could bring a shark fin intact, separate the fin and then sell the fin and the meat through different marketing channels. And now the rule says you can still catch sharks, but you have to dispose of the fin.

00;09;11;01 - 00;09;39;03

Andrew Ropicki

You cannot sell it. And the goal stopping the sale of fins from US fishermen was important in this legislation, but it was also to stop the trade coming through the United States. That was part of the idea. You know, it would have impacts on demand for shark fin soup here in the US. But really it was to send, you know, a strong signal and not have trans-shipment of shark fins where they're caught somewhere else.

00;09;39;06 - 00;09;48;06

Andrew Ropicki

And they come into a US port briefly before moving on to another place. The idea was to kind of just really take the US out of the shark fin trade.

00;09;48;08 - 00;09;58;27

Caleb Stair

So to put a dent in the global shark fin trade, you catch a legal shark now, bring it in. Somebody takes off the fins then and incinerates them or something like that?

00;09;58;29 - 00;10;22;07

Andrew Ropicki

Yeah. It's how it's being enforced is interesting. The idea is fisheries can still land sharks. But but you cannot detach and trade the fin and know, which is the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration that manages these fisheries is trying to step up enforcement. And they have had a couple of high profile actions where they've confiscated some dried shark fins they found.

00;10;22;08 - 00;10;44;07

Andrew Ropicki

But unfortunately, since the new ban went into place, there have been at least anecdotally, some news reports indicating that shark fins are still moving through US ports and undercover journalists at found restaurants in the US. They're still selling shark fin soup. I mean, they had to basically say, it wasn't on the menu. You had to get past that.

00;10;44;07 - 00;10;47;09

Andrew Ropicki

But they were able to get shark fin soup at a restaurant.

00;10;47;11 - 00;10;57;00

Alena Poulin

So if it's still being served, albeit on this secret menu, there's still a demand. What are some of the other ways that you can affect the demand for a product?

00;10;57;02 - 00;11;19;15

Andrew Ropicki

Yeah, so if you want to get away from the idea of a ban, what are the other ways to stop shark finning or lessen issues with declining shark stocks around the world? And you can really do two things opposed to a ban. You can try to, as you said, decrease demand for the product through marketing or educational campaigns and environmentally friendly substitutes.

00;11;19;20 - 00;11;45;24

Andrew Ropicki

Or another one you can another route they can go is educating consumers on the negatives associated with the parts of the supply chain where you have finning and you have people harvesting sharks from stocks around the globe that are in bad shape and the species in danger in that area, and give them environmentally sustainable alternatives. And we've seen this in fisheries before with what we kind of describe as eco-labeling.

00;11;46;01 - 00;12;15;11

Andrew Ropicki

One of the famous examples is dolphin safe tuna. The switch from changing the way we harvest tuna to have a lesser effect on dolphins. And if you take a few steps, you get a little stamp on your can of tuna that says dolphin-safe, and the consumers can make their mind up. We've also got a group called the Marine Stewardship Council that will certify certain seafood products and fisheries as being sustainable and not having a bad, you know, a negative environmental impact.

00;12;15;14 - 00;12;51;22

Andrew Ropicki

And for sharks, this type of strategy could be something you could have a no finning label, or it could be harvested from sustainably well-managed stocks, not from threatened or endangered species, things like that. On the other end of the spectrum, decreasing demand for the product. China has had some success with this. There was a former NBA basketball player, Yao Ming, who is from China, who took part in this really big ad campaign, kind of talking about the problems with shark fin soup and there's some evidence that it led to a large drop in Chinese consumption of shark fin soup.

00;12;51;24 - 00;13;02;03

Alena Poulin

And so you mentioned here in the United States, we have some of the most effectively managed fisheries. Has there seem to have been any impact on those fisheries from this ban so far.

00;13;02;05 - 00;13;22;10

Andrew Ropicki

Here in Florida? it's still kind of early. I work a lot with Florida fishermen, so I'll talk about my experience with them. I can tell you it has led to a decrease in shark fishing, and it's negatively impacted those fishers who actively target sharks because they're losing a lot of revenue on each shark they catch when they can't sell the fin.

00;13;22;14 - 00;14;30;10

Andrew Ropicki

Myself and some others in our department did some research for the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, where we estimated... this was prior to the federal ban. Florida was considering its own fin ban, and they wanted to know what the impacts would be on commercial fishing. And we did some estimates. And, you know, it's a small fishery. We estimated it would be about 17 jobs lost and 1.6 million a year in industry output. Recently, we have used a National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration economic model that kind of goes through the entire seafood supply chain. Those numbers I just gave were just for commercial harvesters, for the fishers. But this, this model goes commercial harvesters, you know, the people they sell to the processors, the dealers, the wholesale distributor is on retail. And when we ran it through that kind of general model, we got numbers. It's about 30 jobs lost and about 3.3 million in industry output across all the different seafood sectors. So it's, you know, not one of our bigger fisheries here in Florida, but that's a substantial impact. So we are starting to see some impacts.

00;14;30;13 - 00;14;37;19

Caleb Stair

Well, so broadly speaking, is there anything you want the public to be more aware of?

00;14;37;21 - 00;16;44;03

Andrew Ropicki

I think this is an example of the importance of considering economics in the management of natural resources. The goals of the US fin ban as laid out by its proponents are admirable to decrease shark finning and protect shark stocks. Proponents of the ban argue that removing the U.S. from the global shark fin trade sends a strong signal to the rest of the world and increases awareness of global issues with shark stocks and shark finning. They believe this will lead to other countries working to stop finning and protect sharks like us, and that is a possible outcome of the US shark fin ban.

However, the ban also has the potential to change economic incentives for non-U.S. fishers. It might not lead to the hoped for outcomes when viewed from a global perspective, this might seem

counterintuitive. How could a shark fin ban not decrease shark finning and negatively impact some shark stocks?

As we've discussed, US shark stocks are well managed, and shark populations in US waters are generally healthy. And US fishers were already prohibited from finning sharks in US waters prior to the fin ban. Also, the US has historically served as a net supplier to the global shark fin trade, meaning US fishers harvested more fins than US citizens consumed. The US fin ban could lead to an imbalance in the global shark fin trade, where supply decreases more than demand, which could lead to higher prices for fins and potentially increased harvests in other parts of the world where fisheries management is less effective and shark populations are not healthy. In countries where finning is either not illegal or finning bans are not effectively enforced. Essentially, the US fin ban could remove sustainably sourced U.S. fins from the global marketplace, only to have them replaced with unsustainably sourced fins from other countries. As we have previously discussed, other options include educational campaigns and labeling programs, which could potentially be more effective at decreasing finning and protecting shark stocks, while allowing U.S. fishermen to be more profitable by supplying sustainably harvested fins to the global market.

00;16;44;06 - 00;16;53;22

Caleb Stair

Well, it's probably a good justification for why places like FRE should exist to make everybody a little bit more aware of the economic aspects of a lot of these issues.

00;16;53;25 - 00;17;01;24

Alena Poulin

Absolutely. And well, thank you so much for joining us today, Doctor Ropicki, and providing these insights. We really look forward to having you back here soon.

00;17;01;28 - 00;17;02;18

Andrew Ropicki

Thank you.

00;17;02;20 - 00;17;14;15

Caleb Stair

If you've made it this far, you've finished the entire episode and we thank you for that. Tune in next time for more food for thought. Thanks again for joining us on this episode of F.R.Eeeee Lunch.

00;17;14;15 - 00;17;22;02

Caleb Stair

We hope you'll come back again for seconds.