



REPORT

Planet's biggest slaughter of whale sharks exposed in PuQi, Zhejiang Province, China

HONG KONG, 27 January 2014 – Hong Kong-based wildlife conservation NGO **WildLifeRisk** has revealed that at least one factory in China's Zhejiang Province is killing over 600 whale sharks annually, in what appears to be the world's largest wholesale slaughter of an internationally-protected endangered species. Investigators believe that the PuQi factory is only one of many engaged in the trade of endangered sharks and their products throughout coastal China.



A processing plant by the name of '**China Wenzhou Yueqing Marine Organisms Health Protection Foods Co Ltd**' located in China's PuQi township near Wenzhou, Zhejiang Province, was the target of a **WildLifeRisk** investigation spanning from January 2010 to December 2013. Investigators discovered that the plant has been reaping huge profits from the death of a minimum of six hundred endangered whale sharks a year.

The investigation found that whale shark fins are dried in PuQi and sent to Guangzhou, situated in China's southern Guangdong Province, where they are sold to restaurant owners who commonly use them in the trade as ornaments. The large fins are usually tied with red ribbons and placed on display in entrances, reception areas, or the windows of restaurants selling shark fin soup to attract customers.

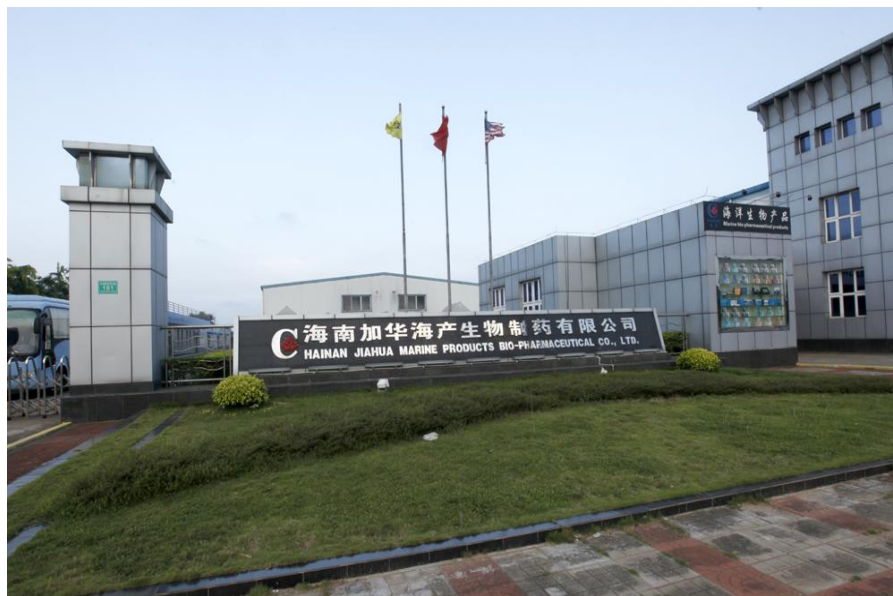


Investigators learned that shark skins are sold as leather into the bag trade, while whale shark lips, stomach and flesh are sold into the restaurant trade as 'food'. However, the real money-maker, is the shark's liver. Shark oil is a valuable product that is concentrated in high quantities in the liver. Oil from the liver is extracted for skin care products and lipstick, as well as for Omega-3 health supplements. These supplements are currently being sold internationally in contravention of **CITES** (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) regulations, as well as relevant Chinese national laws and regulations. It has further been suggested that the Jiahua Omega-3 pills may contain heavy metals such as methyl- mercury, although this has not yet been independently verified.



Factory general manager, Mr. Li Guang, has also admitted on camera that countless basking sharks and great white sharks are also being industrially processed at his PuQi factory.

Investigators discovered that the liver oil from whale and basking sharks is being sent to another processing plant on China's Hainan Island, **'Hainan Jiahua Marine Products Bio- Pharmaceutical Co Ltd'**.



In Hainan the oil is blended with other types of shark liver oil in preparation for export to the United States and Canada in contravention of the internationally-binding **CITES** agreement. Furthermore, Mr. Li admitted to intentionally smuggling other whale shark products out of the country to be sold for human consumption, including the meat and skin.

In a joint-statement, **Alex Hofford** and **Paul Hilton** of **WildLifeRisk** said, “We went to PuQi three times in the last three years, and on each occasion the scale of the slaughter was truly staggering. How these harmless creatures, these gentle giants of the deep, can be slaughtered on such an industrial scale is beyond belief - all for human vanity; lipsticks, face creams, health supplements, shark fin soup restaurants etc. We firmly believe the trade must stop, and it must stop now, or else these animals will eventually face extinction.”



Undercover footage and audio recordings obtained by **WildLifeRisk** reveal that migratory whale sharks present in Australian waters are being caught off the coast of China in the South China Sea, and also further afield in the Pacific – specifically in waters of the Philippines, Indonesia and even as far away as Mexico. Evidence gathered points to an extensive trade network fanning out from China across the globe.

Intentionally or not, these fishermen stand to reap a hefty rewards for their efforts, as a single whale shark can purportedly sell for up to RMB200,000 (US\$31,000) straight off the fishing vessel. After money is exchanged, the sharks may be partially processed on the dock, or transported whole to third party processing plants, such as the one in PuQi.

WildLifeRisk investigators have visited the factory in PuQi several times over the last three years. On each occasion, oil samples were obtained for DNA testing to confirm that the products were in fact of endangered origin. Samples were sent for DNA testing to 'Save Our Seas Shark Research Center' and the 'Guy Harvey Research Institute' in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, United States.



The **WildLifeRisk** investigation also revealed that whole whale sharks being obtained from Chinese coastal fishermen through an elaborate network of agents and middlemen, many of whom may be unaware of the full conservation status of whale sharks.

Opportunistic fishermen based in fishing ports of all sizes up and down the eastern seaboard of China, from Guangdong Province in the South to Shandong Province in the North, are catching whole whale sharks either as by-catch, or as targeted by-catch (intentionally).



The resulting DNA tests were as follows:

100% Basking Shark

CITES Appendix II protected species.

[DNA test result received 06 February 2012]

DNA tests for whale sharks was inconclusive

CITES Appendix II protected species.

[DNA test result received 06 February 2012]

100%, Great White Shark

CITES Appendix II protected species.

[DNA test result received 11 May 2012]

On each visit to PuQi whale shark products were readily available; including fins, skin, meat and oil. All three of the above sharks are Appendix II **CITES** listed species, this means that they are not necessarily threatened with extinction but may become so unless the trade is subject to stricter regulations. In China all three species are protected, which means it is illegal to hunt them without a special permit granted by the Chinese Government.

On a single day in 2012, investigators counted 260 large fins for sale in the dried seafood markets of Guangzhou; QingPing market, ShanHai Town, as well the dried seafood markets of YueXiu, GuangZhou suburb.

The breakdown is as follows:

<i>Whale shark:</i>	136
<i>Basking shark:</i>	69
<i>Great white shark:</i>	55
TOTAL:	260

Paul Hilton and **Alex Hofford** of **WildLifeRisk** believe that consumers must be educated not to buy shark-derived products. Trade in endangered shark and manta ray products is both environmentally unsustainable and morally unethical. If we hope to save species such as the whale shark from extinction, we must hold individuals accountable for violation of international protection laws and demand transparency so that consumers can make educated decisions about the products that they buy.

A compelling economic argument also exists for better protection of whale sharks. **WildLifeRisk** believes that whale sharks are worth more alive than dead. According to the **Pew Environment Group**, “In regions where whale sharks are known to aggregate, ecotourism has proven to be an extremely lucrative alternative to fishing. It has been estimated that whale shark tourism, mainly through recreational diving, is worth about US\$47.5 million worldwide.” Educating local communities about the value of a live whale shark and promoting the transition from hunting to eco-tourism is a practical means of achieving both a sustainable economy and a healthy ocean.



ENDS

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CONTACTS

Paul Hilton

e-mail: mail@paulhiltonphotography.com

phone: +852 9416 0972

+62 813 3980 1257

skype: pauljhilton

Alex Hofford

e-mail: alexhofford@gmail.com

phone: +852 9635 7214

skype: alexhofford

For questions on DNA testing:

Mahmood Shivji / mahmood@nova.edu

Professor, Oceanographic Center

Director, Guy Harvey Research Institute

Director, Save Our Seas Shark Research Center USA

Nova Southeastern University

8000 North Ocean Drive

Dania Beach, FL 33004

United States

Phone: +1 954-262-3653 (office)

Phone: +1 954-494-4795 (cell)

Guy Harvey Research Institute: www.nova.edu/ocean/ghri/

