SAVING THE GREAT WHITE MONSTER
The great white shark is among the most feared animals in the world. But it’s also one of the most important to our oceans. Here’s why this shark needs your LOVE.

BY LAUREN TARSHIS

UP CLOSE

**Problems and Solutions** As you read this article, look for the problems that great white sharks face and why. How are the problems being solved?

LOOK FOR WORD NERD’S 2 TERMS IN BOLD

Imagine for a few minutes that you are the most feared creature in the ocean: the great white shark. Wherever you go, you spread terror and panic. Fish scatter like confetti. Dolphins skitter away. Even six-ton killer whales aren’t safe around you.

And no wonder. There is no animal in the sea that you cannot kill. Mainly you attack by surprise, striking from below, speeding toward your prey like an underwater missile. You hit with the full force of your 4,000-pound body, knocking your prey senseless.
And then—chomp.
Your jaw is one of nature's most devastating weapons, with more than 300 teeth lined up in jagged rows. Your bite is three times as strong as that of a lion; one snap of your mighty jaws could kill a creature many times your size.

But you are not just a killing machine, mindlessly prowling the ocean in search of your next meal. You are a highly intelligent fish, with a curious nature. You can travel more than 10,000 miles in a single year. You and your kin have seen the rainbow-hued coral reefs off Australia and the volcanic shores of the Hawaiian Islands. You know the pitch-dark depths of the Pacific and the white sandbars of the Atlantic. And you are incredibly important to the world's oceans.

As the animal at the top of the food chain—the apex predator—you keep the delicate ocean ecosystem in balance. For millions of years, sharks like you have survived and thrived, with nothing to fear. But in recent years that has changed. You are now in terrible danger. Around the world, sharks like you are being vanished. Many species, including great whites, are in danger of extinction.

What brutal creatures are killing the world's sharks? They don't have fanged teeth or strangling tentacles. They don't even live in the sea. They are humans.
Americans relied on oil from sharks’ livers to waterproof their ships. But it wasn’t until the 1990s that sharks started to be hunted in such staggering numbers. They are hunted for meat and as trophies, but mainly they are hunted for their fins, the key ingredient in shark fin soup. This soup is a delicacy in China, where a single bowl can cost $300. A watery broth filled with stringy strands of shark fin, the soup is not known for its good taste. Rather, it is served to impress important guests at occasions like banquets and weddings.

For centuries, only a small number of Chinese people were wealthy enough to afford the soup. But since the late 1980s, wealth in China has been growing. Today, millions of people can afford luxuries like fancy cars, designer clothing—and shark fin soup. As the demand for shark fins has skyrocketed, the dorsal and pectoral fins of a great white shark can sell for thousands of dollars each.

On any given day, thousands of fishing boats are out on the ocean, prowling the seas. Many trail strong, wire fishing lines hundreds of feet long and studded with as many as 1,500 hooks baited with raw meat. Some boats can catch 100 sharks in a single day. Many fishermen don’t even bother to bring the sharks back to shore. They hack off their fins while at sea and leave the sharks to die in the ocean.

**Rising Alarm**

By the early 2000s, worried scientists were warning that China’s rising demand for shark fin soup was endangering the world’s shark populations. Indeed, over the past decades, the population of some shark species has dropped
99 percent. The great white, tiger, bull, and hammerhead sharks are in particular danger. Sharks are some of Earth’s oldest creatures: Tens of millions of years ago, as Tyrannosaurus rex was roaring across America’s heartland, ancestors of today’s sharks were cruising Earth’s oceans. Yet soon these ancient and fascinating creatures could be wiped off the Earth forever. This would be tragic for sharks, of course. But it would also spell disaster for fragile ocean ecosystems—and the humans who depend on the ocean for food. The disappearance of an apex predator would have an impact on almost every other species of fish, causing some populations to boom and others to vanish.

So imagine once again that you are a great white shark, swimming through the ocean.

Are you doomed?

Just a few years ago, many scientists thought so.

**Attacks Are Rare**

That was before an organization called WildAid started working on this problem. The organization is one of a number of wildlife groups working to save the planet’s many endangered species. The shark was a hard case. People tend to want to help animals that they care about. Pictures of baby elephants or wide-eyed pandas warm our hearts and inspire us to donate to causes dedicated to saving them.

But looking at a photo of a great white shark—the blood-red mouth, the dead black eyes—few people think, “Awwww.” More likely, they shudder and remember the terrifying stories of shark attacks that make headlines every year. It is true that an average of 80 people are bitten by sharks each year, and that each incident is horrifying. But given the number of people who swim and surf in the ocean, these incidents are extremely rare. In fact, a beachgoer is 15 times more likely to get killed by a falling coconut than by a shark. Even many shark-bite survivors, like surfer Bethany

**WHY WE NEED SHARKS**

Sharks, like the great white and the bull, help keep the ocean in balance. Already, the disappearance of sharks in some waters has had dramatic effects. Here’s just one example.

1. Because of overfishing off the east coast of the U.S., bull sharks disappear from these waters.

2. With the bull sharks gone, numbers of their main prey, the cownose ray, explode.

3. Cownose rays devour all the scallops off the North Carolina coast. Now there are almost no scallops left there.

4. Fishermen who earn money from scallops are out of luck—and so are the humans who eat North Carolina scallops.
Hamilton, have dedicated themselves to the cause of protecting sharks.

Still, many people believe the world might be a better place without sharks. And this has made it difficult for scientists to rally support for shark conservation.

Until now.

The leaders of WildAid realized that few Chinese people understood what their appetite for shark fin soup meant for the world’s sharks. WildAid enlisted some of China’s biggest celebrities, like former basketball player Yao Ming and actor Jackie Chan, to raise awareness. They ran advertisements on TV showing gruesome scenes of sharks being slaughtered for their fins. The campaign attracted enormous attention and has been more successful than anyone dared hope. In 2012, the Chinese government banned shark fin soup from official banquets. Many young people are refusing to serve the soup at their weddings.

Last year, the number of shark fins imported into China dropped by nearly 30 percent.

Danger—and Hope

With fewer people wanting shark fin soup, fishermen will no longer get high prices for fins. Soon, experts hope, fins will be all but worthless, and fishermen will have no reason to hunt sharks.

WildAid founder Peter Knights points out that the success of this campaign shows that even difficult problems can be solved with creative thinking—and hope.

But danger still lurks for you and other sharks, at least for now. Stay away from fishing boats, with their nets and thousand-hook fishing lines. Steer clear of the crowded beaches with splashing humans, where the sight of your fin knifing through the water will cause panic.

Still, you can have hope that the human creatures who have threatened you will learn to prize you. And perhaps millions of years from now, your descendants will be the most powerful creatures in the ocean, just as you are today.