

Poachers target the great white

Illegal fishing puts pressure on ocean's top predator.

After 13 years of official protection, great white sharks in South Africa could soon once again be slaughtered for profit. While smuggling syndicates are decimating the South African abalone population (*BBC Wildlife*, September 2003), government nature conservation officials have been tipped off that the same poachers are also killing great white sharks for their jaws, teeth and fins.

During a recent raid on two curio shops near Cape Town, white-shark teeth necklaces were confiscated, and undercover operatives posing as tourists were told that a jaw could also be procured. In South Africa, white-shark teeth are sold for between £15 and £30, while a jaw fetches around £400. The bulk of white-shark contraband is believed to be smuggled out of the country, however, where wealthy collectors will pay up to £10,000 pounds for a large jaw.

The village of Gansbaai, situated 100km east of Cape Town, is the world's Mecca for tourists wishing to go cage-diving with great white sharks. Craig Spencer, senior nature conservation officer for the region and head of the anti-poaching unit, says that the white-shark ecotourism industry is the biggest money-spinner in the area, bringing in more than \$3.5 million (£2 million) a year to this relatively impoverished stretch of coast.

Shark biologist Michael C Scholl of the White Shark Trust estimates that the entire



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Hands off. Curios such as these sharks' teeth have almost certainly come from illegally poached great white sharks. Don't buy them.

South African population could consist of as few as several thousand animals, and his research has shown that a large percentage of that population visits Dyer Island, off Gansbaai, at least once in their lives and that more than 30 different white sharks can be encountered here during a single day.

Scholl believes that large-scale, illegal fishing at such an important migratory bottleneck could decimate the entire South African population within just a matter of years. Currently, abalone poachers seem to be targeting great white sharks on an on-demand basis only, but conservationists fear that, once abalone poaching ceases to be profitable, the poachers could redirect their efforts solely

towards catching great whites.

At the southern tip of Africa, the fate of the abalone and the white shark are closely intertwined, and the government of the first country wise enough to protect this apex predator back in 1991 must ensure that the white shark does not follow the abalone to the edge of extinction.

Tourists also have a role to play and should under no circumstance purchase any white-shark products and should report the sale of teeth and jaws to the appropriate South African authorities.

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Action

- **Anti-poaching hotline** (in South Africa) ☎ 0800 116110.
- **The White Shark Trust** www.whitesharktrust.org

MALAYSIA Only a few months ago, scientists announced the discovery of a genetically distinct **Asian elephant** in Sabah on the island of Borneo (Discoveries, November). Now, conservationists are warning that these pygmy elephants are being captured for sale to zoos in China and Japan. With only an estimated 2,000 in Sabah, the Born Free Foundation says the Malaysian wildlife authorities should be protecting – not exploiting – them. More at www.bornfree.org

WORLD Countries with corrupt governments are likely to be less successful at **protecting their wildlife**. Scientists from the Durrell Institute of Conservation and Ecology and Cambridge University correlated governance scores against three biodiversity components – forest cover, African elephants and black rhinoceroses. The researchers also found that those countries that have a high biodiversity and are identified as priority areas for conservation tend to have lower governance scores, and that this raises questions about the universal applicability of some conservation policies.



Doug Perrine/SeaSpec.com

Net concern. Research suggests fishing kills a third of all sea turtles.

OCEANS Nearly one in three **sea turtles** may be dying every year as a result of being caught accidentally in fishing nets and on longlines. The research confirms growing concerns that fisheries all over the world threaten species such as leatherback, loggerhead and green turtles. Scientists used satellite-tracking records to determine when turtles had been captured and said the work highlighted "the need for increased protection." More at www.swan.ac.uk/bs/turtle