

## The Disgrace of Shark Tournaments

Many people love to hate sharks, their animosity fed by hyperbolic portrayals of these animals as killing machines. But if they're such fearsome predators, intent on eating every beachgoer, why does the number of human fatalities from shark attacks worldwide average fewer than six a year? If these fish rule the oceans, why are many shark species in danger of disappearing, with some populations down by 90 percent within the past 40 years? And if sharks are so powerful, like the saw-toothed monster in the movie *Jaws* who dragged down a 35-foot fishing trawler to kill her human adversary, why are thousands of the biggest and baddest killed each year in shark tournaments without a single loss of human life from shark attacks?

It seems that sharks are in need of a serious public relations makeover. Yes, they are brutes. But of the nearly 550 species, few have been known to attack people. And they play a vital role as apex predators in the ocean's food chain.

While scientists study these creatures to gain a better understanding of their importance to the marine ecosystem, as many as 100 million are being killed each year for their fins and meat and as a byproduct of the commercial fishing industry's indiscriminate hooks and nets. The floundering shark population cannot sustain this degree of slaughter, yet thousands also continue to be hunted in U.S. shark tournaments for money and bragging rights. The one-sided contests pit well-armed humans against unsuspecting sharks, and the sharks never win.

Now an unexpected champion has stepped forward to speak out against these devastating tournaments. Avid angler and professional photographer John Land Le Coq of Fishpond, a fishing products line, says the tournaments are a disgrace to the art of fishing and perpetuate the stereotype of aggression that has shadowed the shark for too long. He hopes to use his photography and Fishpond's credibility among fishermen to celebrate sharks and their vital role in the natural world. In this interview, he spoke with writer Ruthanne Johnson about his collaboration with The HSUS and his independent advocacy work on behalf of these maligned creatures.



**Q: Thousands of sharks die in tournaments every year. This is a drop in the bucket compared to the millions killed in the commercial fishing industry. Why speak out against shark tournaments when there are bigger battles to fight?**

**LE COQ:** It really scares me to see how people are using the ocean's resources, and I often wonder how anything can still be living in the

ocean anymore the way we are using it. The problem becomes greater for sharks because they are not perceived as pretty or cuddly—or vulnerable. People think that sharks are just sharks, but they are in serious trouble. These tournaments, which are fueled by prizes and money, are a deadly betrayal of the species in a derogatory way. I mean, here's an animal, it's overfished and humiliated in these tournaments. They are so important to our whole ecosystem and so fragile. These tournaments are just wrong.

**Q: Why defend such a feared predator of the sea?**

**LE COQ:** The method of take is clearly wrong, and so is the premise behind these tournaments. This isn't about someone fishing with their grandfather and taking their catch home to eat for dinner. These tournaments promote the unethical side of taking an animal. I can't imagine this happening with any other animal, like elk. The hooks they use in these tournaments to catch sharks are huge, and then they pull up the animal with something called a gaff, a huge hook with a sharp barb on the end. Even if they catch and release the shark, its chances of survival with the injuries it has sustained are slim to none. So, it's not necessarily the sharks whom I'm interested in, but more the cruel and barbaric method of take.



Shark tournaments are unethical and humiliating to the animals, says fisherman John Land Le Coq.

**Q: How do you reconcile being a fisherman with speaking out against shark tournaments?**

**LE COQ:** I grew up in Colorado and started fishing with my dad when I was about 2. We had an irrigation ditch in front of our house and I used to fish there for hours. I remember the cottonwood trees and the light on the grass and the sound of the red-winged blackbirds, all those wonderful things that are intangible. For me, fishing is not really about fishing; I've been catching and releasing my whole life. More, fishing gets you to places you may not otherwise go in life. People who participate in these shark tournaments have nothing to do with this concept of fishing. For them, it's about money, partying, drinking beer, and big boats tugging out into the ocean. It's about bringing in the biggest, fattest shark for money and prizes. The tournaments have nothing to do with nature at all. It's a mentality that doesn't represent the mind-set of a true sports fisherman.

**Q: You own a company that sells fishing products. How will you use your position to campaign against shark tournaments?**

**LE COQ:** I think sharks need an advocate from the fishing industry, and we'll be going to several of these tournaments representing Fishpond with banners and other educational literature to hand out about sharks being a critical component in the marine ecosystem. I'm sure we'll make a lot of people mad, but we need to show there is a fishing company that abhors this practice. Fishpond will be there with

The Humane Society to say "no" to what they are doing. We're also launching a shark-free branding campaign to include hangtags on all the items we sell that say "troubled waters," have a photo of a dead shark, and a link to our website. In a selfish way, I think this will only strengthen our brand because a large majority of people are going to be on our side. I'm promoting the purest form of fishing, and that's the strength: Here we are at Fishpond saying, "Let's recognize the problem."

**Q: You have been a professional photographer since the 1980s, first cutting your teeth during the landowner uprising in Guatemala and now taking photographs that celebrate the American West. How do you hope to use your photography in the campaign against shark tournaments?**

**LE COQ:** With photography, I have always tried to tell a story through my imagery. I obsessively and romantically observe light, which does so much to a person's mood, and make it my goal to weave together a story about the natural environment and how people relate to it. There are many pictures of dead sharks, and I want to expose what happens at these shark tournaments, to portray these tournaments as abusive and a disgrace to the U.S. My photographs will be a metaphor of that guy who puts the dead deer on the hood of his car and drives around town, and how these tournaments humiliate shark species. I want to capture pictures that will hopefully create change.

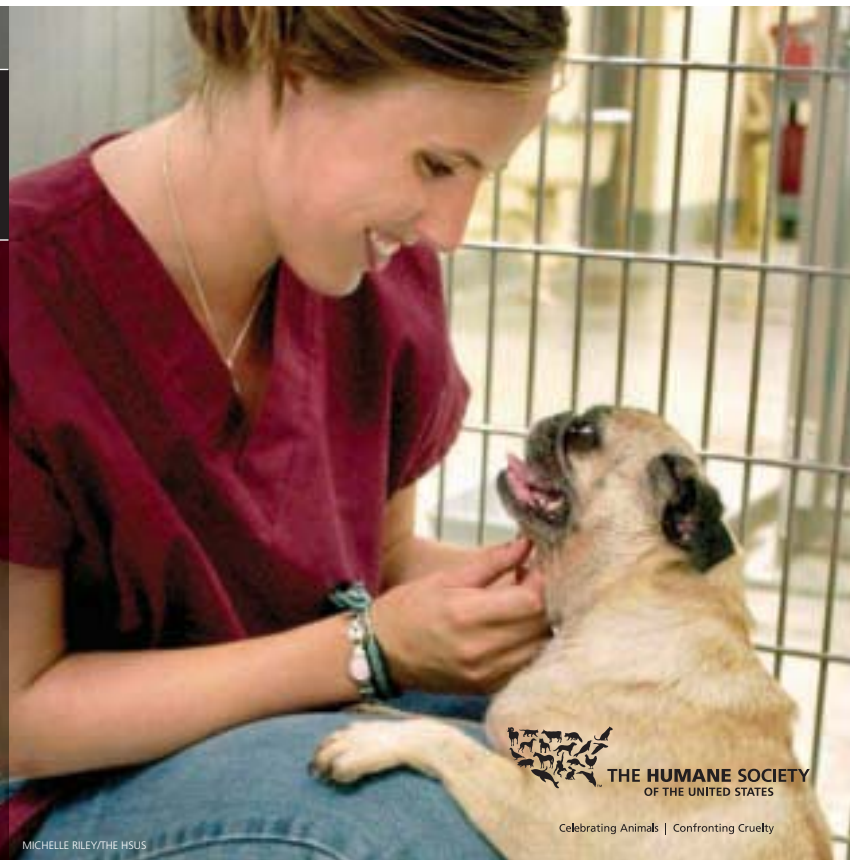
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