DAVID MCGUIRE was diving underwater in the Pacific Ocean, exploring coral reefs around remote islands, when the questions first began to gnaw at him.

What’s going on here with these islands? Where are the sharks?

McGuire was studying marine ecosystems for the University of California-Berkeley, an expedition that would take him from San Francisco to New Zealand and back, between 2001 and 2003.

“Some of these reefs had hundreds of sharks—it was crazy—and lots of fish and healthy coral,” he remembers. “And then other islands, where it should have been the same, only had juvenile sharks or hardly any sharks at all. And the reefs didn’t look as healthy. And so that kind of inspired the [questions].”

Eventually, talking to locals, he began to get answers: Huge numbers of sharks were falling victim to the brutal practice known as finning—whereby fishermen haul a shark onboard, hack off his fins, and then dump the mutilated animal back overboard to drown, or starve, or be eaten by another predator. This, primarily to supply the global demand for shark fin soup.

Arriving at larger ports, McGuire began to see shark fins lining the rails of fishing vessels. Returning home later, he began researching the issue. He would produce a documentary. He would start the nonprofit group Shark Stewards. He would go on to work with The HSUS, advocating for state bans on the shark fin trade, and with Humane Society International, collaborating on global shark policies.

“Sharks are beautiful. I love diving with sharks—I have for decades,” says McGuire. “Ever since I was a kid, I wouldn’t swim away from sharks; I’d swim towards them. And they’re just beautiful, consummately adapted, perfect predators. And it’s just a tragedy to kill them, just for a body part. It’s cruel. … It’s an incredible waste.”

An estimated 100 million sharks are killed each year, mostly for their fins, which are actually, unbelievably, tasteless in the soup, a luxury dish in Chinese cultures. That’s left several species facing the very real threat of extinction, from skittish hammerheads to the more placid porbeagles.

But animal protection and conservation groups continue to push back—and in 2013, the global campaign against shark finning scored its most significant year to date.

“We’ve made huge, huge steps,” McGuire says.

Adds Iris Ho, manager of HSI’s wildlife program: “It’s a momentum that keeps building. We are definitely at the high point, but there’s still much to do. There are still countries that don’t have shark finning regulations. And there’s also more vulnerable shark species that need protection.”

Among the critical victories:

- For the first time in its 40-year history, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species elected to regulate the trade in certain shark and manta ray species of high commercial value. That
means governments can issue permits to export oceanic whitetip sharks, porbeagle sharks, and three species of hammerhead sharks only when they determine such fishing would not be detrimental to the species’ survival.

- India instituted a requirement that fishermen land sharks with their fins still attached—a measure that not only addresses the sheer cruelty of the practice but also, by virtue of the limited freezer space onboard fishing vessels, will help slow the number being killed. From 2000 to 2008, India caught an average 74,050 tons of sharks, rays, and skates each year; only Indonesia killed more.

- New York—the country’s second-largest market behind California—banned the possession, sale, trade, and distribution of shark fins. The HSUS helped pass similar legislation in Delaware and Maryland as well, for a total of eight states and three U.S. territories that have passed HSUS-backed bans.

- A growing fleet of airlines from countries such as Australia, Taiwan, Mexico, and South Korea have announced restrictions or outright bans on shipping fins.

- Hong Kong announced that it would no longer serve shark fins at official functions. (The Chinese government made a similar announcement in 2012.)

- And on Capitol Hill, 73 federal lawmakers signed a letter urging the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration not to preempt the country’s eight state bans—as the agency has suggested it will do—when it implements the 2011 federal finning ban.

“I really think the U.S. should be a leader in shark conservation,” says U.S. Rep. Michael Grimm, R-N.Y. “The practice itself of shark finning—it’s inhumane, it’s despicable, it’s harmful to the ocean’s ecosystem, and it’s unfair to U.S. fishermen. So I think from every stakeholder involved, we should be appalled and doing everything we can to prevent this disgusting practice.

“I don’t get too excited over too many things because I have a lot of issues on my plate. But I find this one particularly offensive.”

Also urgent: continuing to curb consumption in China, the world’s largest market for fins, where former basketball star Yao Ming has starred in powerful public service announcements about the soup. “Remember,” he says, after pushing his bowl away, “when the buying stops, the killing can too.” In advance of Chinese New Year celebrations this January, HSI encouraged citizens to snap photos of themselves with the “Fin-Free Chinese New Year” slogan—photos that were then combined to form a larger picture of a shark. The organization continues to reach out to high-end restaurants and hotels, asking them to forgo shark fin dishes as well.

In August, a dozen cyclists biked through Beijing decked out in shark costumes, stopping at restaurants, collecting “No Shark Fin” pledges, and eventually meeting up with celebrities for a public event. HSI has emphasized educational outreach by supporting such events—as well as youth groups like the one Jun Li oversees in Shenzhen.

A college senior majoring in social work, Li leads a group of 16. They rewrite popular children’s songs with lyrics about sharks, blog daily about their work, and come up with recipes for faux shark fin soup.

Promoting their own cycling event on China’s microblogging site, Weibo, the group unexpectedly got the Chinese equivalent of a “retweet” when a famous restaurant owner sent their message to his 2.3 million followers.

“We were all of a sudden deeply encouraged by that!” Li would write later. “[We] never thought that someone...that famous [would] take notice of us. Incredible!”

One moment, one idea, one grave concern—suddenly reaching millions.