

Nov 04, 2016 by *Colin Alexander*

Shark-Fin Public Diplomacy ^[1]

Celebrity chef Gordon Ramsay's recent documentary about trade in shark-fins focused on Costa Rica and the pariah state of Taiwan. While filming he was reportedly threatened at gunpoint and covered in petrol by those who took exception to his presence. While this undoubtedly made for compelling television viewing on the UK's Channel 4 TV station on Sunday January 16 (soon to be aired in the USA), for analysts of public diplomacy and soft power, the incident demonstrates a number of underlying truths.

The negative fall-out from accosting and threatening a worldwide celebrity, in the current climate of celebrity obsession, will enlighten an audience which until now would have known little about either country other than Taiwan = electronics and a dispute with China; Costa Rica = environmental consciousness and no army. Add 'havens for the controversial trade in shark-fins' to that list for both.

Indeed, both countries have worked hard over the past few years to promote their national 'brand'. Costa Rica has led the charge on tropical environmental diplomacy with its attempts to become the world's first carbon neutral country, and it remains a popular destination for the environmentally conscious to assist with eco-initiatives and to learn conservation techniques to be implemented in their own country. Coincidentally, Dr. Rene Castro the Costa Rican Foreign Minister spoke to an audience at the London School of Economics on Monday January 17 regarding Environmental Diplomacy and failed to address the harm that this practice is doing to the ecosystem of the ocean near Costa Rican shores.

However, this report by Ramsay will only serve to harm the image of Costa Rica as an eco-paradise.

On the other hand, the issue for Taiwan is to convince an increasingly skeptical Central American public that their region should remain diplomatically engaged with Taiwan instead of the increasingly powerful People's Republic of China. Taiwan is currently diplomatically recognized by only 23 countries worldwide, with the majority of these in Central America and the Caribbean.

Furthermore, Taiwan will be compared to China whether it likes it or not. Indeed, Taiwan's soft power since the mid 90's has largely come from adhering to internationally agreed norms of behaviour – open and largely un-corrupt democracy, unrestricted media, and respect for human rights. Basically, doing the opposite of China.

However, issues like Ramsay's investigation, Taiwan's first state executions in many years, and the contemporary bribery scandals (involving Taiwan state monies and the former Presidents of Guatemala and Costa Rica), will leave many Central Americans scratching their heads with a 'pot-kettle-black' scenario regarding China playing on constant loop.
