



**WHEN SHE WAS 10** years old, Ms Kathy Xu wrote a letter to the Ministry of the Environment, requesting for more designated wildlife conservation sites in Singapore.

"Imagine my shock when my vice-principal called me out during a school assembly to tell the school about the letter I had written and she read the reply from the Ministry out loud. I was shaking like a leaf in front of everyone!" she remembers.

"I guess I have always believed in the need for conservation – I dreamt of being an environmentalist when I was a little girl."

Little wonder then, that when seven years ago, Ms Xu came across a documentary entitled *Sharkwater*, which uncovers the plight of sharks and the atrocities of the shark finning trade and industry, the conservationist in her resurfaced. "That is when I researched more about organisations that try to protect sharks and I stumbled upon Shark Savers," she says. "I signed up to be a volunteer."

Shark Savers is a United States-based organisation with branches worldwide. In 2013, its Asian branches launched a successful campaign

roping in celebrities in Singapore and Hong Kong to pledge not to eat shark's fin. The active campaigning has seen demand for shark's fin drop in Singapore by a third since 2011.

It was during her undergraduate days at the National University of Singapore that Ms Xu picked up scuba diving. "They offered special rates for undergrads who wanted to learn diving back then," she recalls. "I had always been reading books or watching documentaries about the plight of sharks and unsustainable fishing practices in the world, but the magical moment I fell in love was when I went whale shark watching at Exmouth off Ningaloo Reef [in Western Australia] about three years ago," she says.

"Plane spotters in the sky would radio down to the boats when they saw whale sharks. It was about a three-hour

the problem through converting the fishermen's source of livelihood."

The 31 year-old came up with the idea of a social enterprise: an ecotourism company in Lombok that would convert shark-finning boats into tourism boats, manned by the fishermen. The rationale: the fishermen toiled to harvest sharks – up to 400 a day – but are paid a pittance, while the shark's fin traders earn large sums for selling the fins to high-end restaurants. The Dorsal Effect discourages the harvesting of sharks and offers an

had approached, as well as start-up grants. There were also the competitions she had taken part in, but failed to reach subsequent rounds. Then there were the "naysayers who admired my courage but said the idea was never going to work," she recalls.

The Dorsal Effect ran its maiden expedition in September this year. "The fishermen made about 85 per cent of the money they would have from a good month at shark fishing," she says. "But they are still skeptical and wary about what I am trying to do since I cannot prove it will be sustainable yet."

Ms Xu made another trip to Lombok in November, this time conducting two boat trips. "This trip was important as I had friends who had booked for the trips already. I am really hoping to get the shark fishermen to see what I am trying to do and understand it in a better economic sense," she

says. She stayed there for a month to drive the business, establish relationships with the fishermen and legitimise The Dorsal Effect as an ecotourism partner with the Indonesian Tourism Board.

The road is a long, hard one for this crusader, who admits the obstacles are "way too many; parental objections and lack of finances are the biggest constant ones."

"The whole thought of trying to convert a fishing village's routine practice is daunting enough, especially when I do not even speak Sasak or Bahasa Indonesia," she says candidly. "Not many people have heard of Lombok, so I need to try and generate tourist demand for the boat trips as well."

It is a far cry from her days as a teacher at Orchid Park Secondary School, where she taught English and History for seven years before quitting last year to run The Dorsal Effect.

"I always told my students to fight for what they believe in or for those who cannot stand up for themselves, so I guess I have to walk the talk now. Staying grounded and sincere with the people I meet – just as I have always been with my students – also helps them to stay open to the cause I am trying to advocate." ♥



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road and boat ride out to the Indian Ocean and it was pure magic the moment we put on our snorkelling gear and jumped into the ocean to behold a six-metre-long juvenile whale shark. I was so captivated I forgot to breathe! This was just a juvenile one, not even full-sized! It was truly amazing for me.

"From that point on, I knew there was no turning back if I wanted my children and my children's children to be able to see sharks alive and to swim freely with them in the ocean," Ms Xu says.

Her ecotourism outfit The Dorsal Effect ([www.thedorsaleffect.com](http://www.thedorsaleffect.com)) became an idea that took root in 2012, one that complemented current efforts. "Volunteering with Shark Savers saw me doing a lot of advocacy and public awareness talks through educational outreach and presentations," she explains. "They were doing a lot on the demand side, and I wanted to do something to address the supply side of

alternative source of income for the fishermen, thus cutting off supply even as demand dwindles.

Conservationists say that sharks do not deliberately hunt humans – often they mistake people for seals. The name The Dorsal Effect addresses this misconception, says Ms Xu. "No thanks to *Jaws* the movie, dorsal fins are commonly associated with sharks and danger. In reality, sharks rarely ever stick their dorsal fins out of the ocean surface!"

Ms Xu's idea won her the third prize at the Singapore International Foundation's Young Social Entrepreneur's Programme 2013, which came with a grant of S\$10,000 as seed funding for her business. It was a big boost to the former teacher who had been plagued up till then with many rejections. These came from potential venture capitalists she

# SWIMMING WITH SHARKS

**KATHY XU (ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES '04) GAVE UP HER CAREER AS A TEACHER TO START A SOCIAL ENTERPRISE, AN ECOTOURISM OUTFIT AIMED AT STOPPING SHARK HARVESTING. BY THERESA TAN**