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## EDUCATION WITH A BITE

*Mnemozine chats with History alumnus Kathy Xu about her passion for shark conservation and educating the masses on the plight of these misunderstood marine predators.*

shark fin industry, talking to schools and potential customers, and the Dorsal Effect is how I could do something on the supply side as well.

**Is it a thriving business in Lombok? Do the fishermen depend entirely on shark's fin for their livelihood?**

It seems like they are thriving, but it is actually the fin traders who benefit from it. The fishermen are actually exploited, and it is the fin traders who earn most of the money. For a kilogram of shark's fin, the fin traders receive about \$650. The boat owners \$30, and the boat crew \$3. So it really is exploitation.

**It must be tough telling the fishermen in Lombok to radically change their livelihoods.**

They haven't been hostile yet. There have been a lot of Caucasian conservationists who have gone before me, taken a lot of photos and even scolded the locals there. It helps that I am Asian and I try not to use the approach of a conservationist yet. Instead, I try to engage them personally and ask how they might want to consider alternative forms of livelihoods. They are more receptive to this approach. For now, I will only adopt the conservation stance with the tourists who come to the island, and tell them that their role here makes a difference. For the fisherman, it's less about the conservation angle for now.

**How do you approach the fishermen then, if it is not from a conservation angle?**

I will go down to the fish market and get involved in their lives. Hear about their stories and find out about their problems. And see if ecotourism will be a means to solve those problems. For instance, a fisherman invited us to his house and told us how his wife left him because he had been away at sea for too many days catching sharks. Ecotourism could possibly be a means of addressing this, where these fishermen could instead bring tourists for day tours, go back to their families everyday and still make a living.

**Ecotourism might have the converse effect of damaging the area, won't it?**

Well it's something I have thought about before. I've been on other tours, seeing

how others have carried out these tours. One way is to restrict the number of tourists and to brief them thoroughly and tell them what their being here means. Ecotourism means responsible tourism, managing the numbers and giving proper briefings.

**We see you have been going around schools to give talks on shark conservation.**

I talk to tertiary institutions, pre-schools and companies. My favourite crowd is still the younger students because that is the age when they are most receptive. I have, for instance, had a child telling me he had gone home to tell his grandparents not to consume shark's fin. That was encouraging.

**Having been a teacher for seven years, you must be very familiar with the Singapore education system. Do you think the system inculcates in our children sensitivity towards nature and conservation?**

There are a lot of areas the curriculum could work on in terms of conservation and teaching about the marine ecosystem. All these things I have been teaching about sharks are not in the syllabus at all. I hope too that with the Dorsal Effect I can in time bring students on eco-tours as educational packages.

**You definitely have deviated from your study of history in NUS by pursuing this track.**

I do love history a lot still, and believe in its benefits for children. Implicitly, when you learn history it teaches you appreciation for people and empathy. When at the fish markets of Lombok, I see a lot of conservationists scolding the locals. But how about finding out about their lives and why they are doing what they are doing instead? And what can we do for them? I would like to believe that studying history teaches you empathy.

**Last question: which are more dangerous - sharks or the children you have taught?**

Both are not dangerous. Both are lovable to me! ■

**Hi Kathy. Thanks for taking the time to chat with Mnemozine. What have you been up to recently?**

I left my job as a secondary school teacher at the end of last year. Since then, I have been trying to start an ecotourism business at Lombok, Indonesia, as a form of alternative livelihood for the fishermen who are catching sharks there. I am also still volunteering with Shark Savers, and go around to schools and organisations to talk about shark conservation.

**Tell us about your ecotourism business, The Dorsal Effect.**

I had been volunteering with Shark Savers, and their Director for Asia Pacific, Jonn Lu, made me aware of the finning that was happening in Tanjung Lua, Lombok. There are a variety of sharks in Lombok - such as thresher sharks and surprisingly, hammerhead sharks as well. It's ironic, because I've always wanted to see hammerhead sharks in the waters, yet each time I see them in Tanjung Lua, I see them dead. The fins of the hammerhead sharks are actually more in demand than other species of sharks. It is considered a higher grade of shark's fin because of its texture. On the other hand, there are other sharks such as reef sharks whose fins are not as valued, and even when the shark is dead they throw back the shark, fin and all.

I made my way to Lombok in September last year to see for myself what was happening there through talking to the locals. I had been reaching out to the demand side of the

