

The Dorsal Effect

Kathy Xu is on a mission. Her love of sharks and her determination to protect them and the marine ecosystem have created *The Dorsal Effect* – an eco-tourism project that is certainly having a ripple effect in Lombok. As Kathy promotes a change in attitude towards sharks, she is also offering viable, sustainable, and profitable alternatives to shark hunting. It's a four-way winner! Fascinating insights and experiences for visitors, environmentally responsible tourism, lucrative and empowering work for local fishermen and conservation of the sharks that she cares so much about.

Mission impossible? Kathy says not ...

If you had to summarize, really briefly, the aims or objectives of your project, what would you say they were?

I would say that we are trying to provide another 'means to an end' for shark conservation – one that is not charity based. It's about promoting alternative livelihoods for shark hunters, and it achieves a triple bottom line: profits, positive environmental impacts and the empowerment of local communities.

Thinking back to the very beginnings of the project, tell us what motivated you to start this project in Lombok?

It grew out of a love for sharks, after having a few beautiful encounters with them while snorkelling and diving. There is a real need to end the killing of these misunderstood and beautiful creatures – and the idea that they are all man-eating monsters.

Tell us a little about your background. How did you become interested and involved in this type of work?

I was a secondary school teacher who was always passionate about conservation and environmental protection, as well as marine issues. I was always talking about these things and sharing ideas with my students, but one day I decided I should stop being a hypocrite and start doing something. So I left teaching to start an eco-tourism business, built on a cause that was so dear to my heart.

For people who might not be aware of the term, how would you define 'eco-tourism'?

It's a form of tourism that limits the number of tourists and follows strict regulations to ensure that there is little to zero negative impact on nature and the environment. It follows the principle that nature, conservation and the animals come before the tourists.

With *The Dorsal Effect*, we try to put these ideas into practice – through trash pick-up, by not using sunscreen that isn't reef safe, through responsible snorkelling practices, making sure there is no touching of marine life while we are snorkelling, and by not dropping boat anchors on corals or non-sandy sea beds.

What inspires you the most, as you work towards your goals?

It's pretty inspiring to contribute to a world where it will be possible for future generations to see and experience the beauty of the ocean and its sharks. It's good to think that they could have their own magical encounters, and be humbled by nature and have respect for all marine life.

What are some specific things that have been achieved so far?

At least one shark fisherman, Suhardi, has been fully converted. Now he enjoys taking people out on trips rather than focusing on shark hunting. He was so empowered from the change in direction that he made the commitment to buy the boat that he used to co-own, and he refurbished it completely for the tourists. He takes a real pride in his new job.

On a more personal level, could you tell us about the real positives – the things you have found most satisfying about your work?

There are lots of things ... like getting to meet so many amazing people who are willing to help further the business because they believe in the cause. And taking school groups on marine conservation trips with *The Dorsal Effect* and reading





their feedback – that's really heartening – and seeing their greater awareness and love for sharks and the oceans. It's also satisfying to see people like Suhardi advocating responsible tourism practices, like dropping anchor only on sand, and setting an example by personally picking-up trash that the tourists leave at the beaches, so as not to tire them out... There are just too many to mention! It's been great.

What have been the most challenging aspects of the project?

The financial part of it is challenging. The business has not broken even yet and some plans have to be put on hold, due to lack of resources or finances, but in general, things are slowly picking up. In the shark fin industry, the fishermen are a long way down the chain and usually only make a pittance. The business is lucrative for them only if they are very lucky in their catches. At least I know that the fishermen under me are paid well, and definitely not exploited, as they would be if they continued with shark hunting.

From a business perspective, what opportunities do you see in this type of venture?

Empowering the locals, by opening up more avenues for alternative livelihoods – things like homestay programs, sustainable fishing and so on.

And what about the costs and the risks?

There is always the fear of not having enough people come on the trips. I'm not sure if I should concentrate on fully establishing Lombok as a destination before I move on to others. It's risky to open up more locations, and convert shark markets into eco-tourism destinations, especially in the top shark exporting countries.

What specific benefits do you think *The Dorsal Effect* will have for Lombok?

There will definitely be more tourism dollars, but it will also mean responsible tourism, which protects the natural habitat. We hope that this will have a ripple effect on other tour agencies, and that they will want to make their programs more eco-friendly too.

You obviously care about protecting and preserving sharks. We'd really like to know ... what 'close encounters' have you had with sharks?

In June 2011, when I was at Exmouth, Australia, I vividly remember swimming with a whale shark, in the middle of the Indian Ocean. That was a magical encounter, and it was just so amazing that the moment I jumped into the water, I forgot how to breathe for a while. I really loved how the Australians were careful about implementing regulations to protect the whale sharks. They told us to keep our distance and to allow the scientists to swim past the shark first and collect their data, before we could enjoy the experience. It was a juvenile whale shark –only about 6 metres long – but I think it was easily the most beautiful thing I have ever seen in my life.

Why do you think people find sharks so fascinating?

I actually wish that more people would find sharks fascinating rather than scary. They are majestic creatures with lots of very cool features, like super sensors on their noses and dermal denticles for skin –they are quite unlike any other fish.

And finally, Kathy, how would you like to be describing the success of *The Dorsal Effect* in, say, five (or more) years' time?

I would like to be able to say that, after experiencing *The Dorsal Effect*, more people had become advocates for responsible tourism and shark protection, and that as a result, there were even more shark markets converted into tourist destinations.

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Providing alternative livelihood to shark fishermen in Lombok through ecotourism for shark conservation.

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