



Ignorance

By Tony Wu

Digital illustration © Christopher Hart

Once upon a time, when I was young, I had one of those insightful moments that most children probably have, when I was suddenly and overwhelmingly fed up with school and decided that I wanted to have nothing more to do with the whole concept. I announced my intention to resign from the formal education process to my parents, who proceeded to discharge their parental responsibility by panicking, gesturing violently and threatening to lock me in my room until I was well into old age.

Unable to discuss the issue rationally at home, I tried again at school the next day. As I recall, we were being taught the proper use of infinitive phrases, particularly the use of such phrases as nouns. Ho hum.

When my turn came to think of a suitable example of an infinitive phrase as a noun, I walked up to the blackboard and wrote, "To go to school is useless". As exemplary as my demonstration of this esoteric grammar point was, I nonetheless found myself being invited to stay after class for a private discussion with my teacher.

In her office, my teacher sat across the table from me. She fiddled with a few papers, sighed a couple of times, then looked at me with a disconcerting smile and slowly said, "To be ignorant is to destroy your future". That was it, I was free to go.

More recently, I was at a dive show some years ago, when something happened that reminded me of the cryptic

message I had received so many years earlier from my grammar teacher.

As part of a display on marine conservation issues, I had put up a poster provided by the National Coalition for Marine Conservation:

(<http://www.savethefish.org/>)

On the poster was a close-up view of a great hammerhead shark, accompanied by the words "Today's Special: Shark Fin Soup. Goes Great With Sweet and Sour Panda."

I had strategically placed this and other similar displays at the exit of the show, so that everyone coming out of the convention hall would see it. Overall, the response was highly positive, with many people asking about conservation issues and engaging in meaningful discussion.

Two visitors in particular, however, stood out in my mind.

During a relatively quiet period, a nice looking, young Asian couple walked up to the poster. They examined it, admired the impressive image of the hammerhead, and read the caption. A brief moment of silence ensued.

The young woman then turned to her companion and lovingly whispered to him, "Why don't you ever treat me to something nice like sweet and sour panda. I want to try it." To which he responded: "Aiyah, too expensive lah, sharkfin good enough already." They sauntered off arm-in-arm, eagerly

discussing where they might find sautéed panda at a reasonable price.

It was at this point that the image of my teacher's knowing smile flashed across my mind like a bolt of mental lightning.

You see, the biggest hurdle we face with conservation is the barrier of ignorance. Educational priorities, cultural tradition and social values don't provide the knowledge and materials necessary to help people understand complex issues like over-consumption, cyanide fishing, habitat degradation and the like.

To make matters worse, people who live in urban environments are entirely removed from the menial process of gathering food and ensuring sustainable food supplies. Most people, even the highly educated, simply can't relate to the extended process that leads to having fully stocked grocery shelves and large menu choices at restaurants.

As slow as I may be, I think I finally understood what my teacher was trying to convey. The only way that a person, or a society, can change and improve is through education – removing ignorance.

So long as people believe, for example, that shark fins grow back when cut off, that dumping chemicals into the ocean doesn't affect us, that fish stocks are inexhaustible, that making money is more important than ensuring a sustainable future...there can only be one outcome.

To paraphrase my wise teacher, "To be ignorant is to destroy our future."

T o n g a

"Each summer, I head for winter. More specifically, I travel to Tonga, which is on the other side of the world, to photograph southern-hemisphere humpback whales (*Megaptera novaeangliae*). Travelling from the Southern Ocean to the islands that make up the Kingdom of Tonga, many of the southern hemisphere's humpbacks spend part or all of their winter in Tongan waters. Pregnant females visit the islands to give birth and raise their little ones, while males tag along in hopes of finding a mate. While I never tire of watching and photographing smaller residents of the sea, I treasure the time I have with the whales. We don't know very much about these majestic mammalian cousins of ours, so there's always an element of mystery and the possibility of discovery".



© A newborn calf I nicknamed Orion coming up for a breath of air, while the mother waits below.

To read more about these fascinating animals, see Tony's blog at
www.tonywublog.com