



# BLACK and WHITE

By Tony Wu

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Unlike some people, who seem to have a flair, even liking, for spending hours and hours combing the latest in hip trends for new and more inventive ways to prim and preen themselves, I've always been a fashion slouch, much to chagrin of my female acquaintances.

Long ago, I discovered that by limiting my wardrobe to clothes that are either black or white, I was ready for any circumstance — from white T-shirts and a pair of shorts for hanging out (except for occasions involving pasta, when black T-shirts help hide the inevitable splotches of tomato sauce), to black trousers complemented by a black T-shirt and black jacket for formal events.

Out went most colours (except perhaps blue, which I still love), and patterns? Forget it. You won't catch me with plaid, argyle or even stripes. Much too confusing — like putting a chameleon on a Tartan backdrop.

I guess the reason I prefer black and white is that it's easy. There's no in-between. It's perfectly clear, and I can feel completely confident with my limited choice. Black. White. That's it. The perfect solution.

These days, it seems as if more and more people are becoming chromatically challenged like me, but not necessarily in terms of wardrobe choice.

In the context of global warming, for instance, you hear the phrase "The debate is over" bandied about without a second thought by media, politicians, NGOs, and many well-meaning, concerned people.

Among divers, hard-and-fast policies like "No gloves...ever" or "You are not allowed to touch anything...ever" have become repeated and applied with dogmatic fervour. Demands for bans on all human interaction with cetaceans, and calls for local peoples to conform to our views of conservation are repeated on a daily basis.

As nice and neat as these sentiments are, unfortunately, life just isn't like a wardrobe.

Before becoming indignant and condemning me to the ranks of shark finners and peddlers of toxic waste, take a look at the photo left, which I took on a recent trip to the Lembeh Strait. It triggered, in my mind, a cascade of thought about seeing the world in monochrome.

The image is of an octopus, clearly comfortable in a discarded bottle. I'm quite certain that anyone who's dived in the Lembeh Strait or any other muck-diving destination has seen similar scenes.

Now, I'd be the last to encourage you to throw garbage into the water, but obviously, this octopus is benefiting from the bottle. It's safe, secure — using the discarded beverage container as a makeshift home, whether just for a few hours or on a longer term basis.

Of course, one could easily argue that the octopus would have found a home elsewhere, had it not been for the littering of an environmental criminal who thoughtlessly tossed waste into the pristine underwater environment.

Yes, you could argue that. But you could also choose to look around, and see that many of the world-famous critters in Lembeh make a happy home in our waste — from eels to pufferfish, from gobies to octopus, from pipefish to mantis shrimp, and everything in between.

If you've never been to Lembeh, you could trawl the internet for photos from this world-renowned dive destination, and see that a significant proportion of them involve critters living in garbage.

I suppose the point, if there is one, is that life is not nuance-deficient. Life, if anything, is almost always grey. Clear-cut, absolute statements are often incorrect, and debate about any topic should never "be over".

In other words life, unlike my wardrobe, is rarely black and white. ■