



Targeting the demand side of the live reef fish trade

By Joel Simonetti¹

A few years ago I was teaching fifth grade at an international school in Indonesia. In my class were children from Singapore, South Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, the Philippines, Indonesia and half a dozen other nations from around the globe. Like many teachers, I often share with my class interesting excerpts from books that I read. This creates a 'book club' atmosphere in the classroom where kids learn, like adults at a social gathering, to raise questions among their peers related to their reading. Teaching children how to have these discussions lets them see how reading generates curiosity, and leads to inquiry, greater understanding and sometimes even passionate interest.

One book I shared with my class in Indonesia was Carl Safina's *Song for the Blue Ocean*. My students already knew about my personal interest in reefs and fish. They had already sat through probably too many of my slide shows — looking at underwater pictures I'd taken on frequent dive trips — so coral reefs and the idea that the oceans could be overfished wasn't new to them. What was new, however, to all of us, was the recipe for shark-fin soup Safina included in his book.

'You mean,' said one of my South Korean students, 'the soup gets its flavor from chicken and pork? It's so good. I thought it got its taste from the fins.' Other students also voiced their surprise at this discovery. We talked about it; about the ethics of finning; about humans eating fish populations unsustainably and about our personal responsibilities in these long chains of events. We wondered about the difference between tradition and fad. We wondered if traditions are always sacrosanct.

Of course I've simplified what happened. My students didn't use words like 'sacrosanct,' but many of the privileged 10 year olds in my classes were sophisticated, deeply concerned about the environment, and already in possession of a strong sense of personal morality. What they lacked, however,

was the information necessary to make the incredibly broad connections that exist between cause and effect in today's world.

To my surprise, a week after we discussed the recipe, a couple of Korean boys related how they'd refused to eat shark-fin soup when their parents had taken them out to dinner over the weekend. I'll never forget that moment and the looks in the other students' faces as these two boys proudly retold how they'd acted upon their convictions and tried to 'educate' their parents. Knowledge had empowered these kids to make personal, meaningful choices, and they not only developed convictions, but they developed the strength to act upon them.

In subsequent weeks, more students followed suit. During this time I showed the recipe in Safina's book to a science teacher colleague of mine, my wife Lisa Cook. In a unit on marine ecology, she shared Safina's recipe with her sixth graders, with similar results. She was also able to build upon the connections between people's consumption patterns and the trade in reef curios, which is widespread in Indonesia. As a way of educating the wider school community and communicating what they had learned about the impacts of their consumption patterns, Lisa's class built a large glass cabinet, which is on display in the school's foyer. Her students filled the cabinet with donated stuffed sea turtles, turtle shell jewellery, and endangered animals and shells.

Subsequently, many parents came to Lisa and echoed the surprise of their children. They hadn't realised that the triton trumpets, giant clam shells and the turtle shell jewellery they had bought in Bali were the tragic end products in a chain of events driven by their own consumption patterns.

It was in part from this experience that 'The Shark Finning and Live Reef Fish Education Project' was born. This two-year project, funded by The David

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and Lucille Packard Foundation, is a targeted education program that will hopefully contribute to the building of a marine conservation ethic among Southeast Asia's affluent youth. In pursuit of this goal, Lisa and I, with the help of others, will produce, and distribute educational materials specifically designed to raise the awareness of two unsustainable fisheries centered in the region — the trade in live reef fish for consumption (LRFT) and the trade in shark fins for use in making shark fin soup.

The materials that the project will create — two resource books and a curriculum — will be designed for upper elementary and middle school-aged children. They will be distributed through East Asia's network of international schools at regional teacher conferences. These schools serve more than 50,000 kindergarten to grade 12 students many of whom are wealthy ethnic Chinese and affluent Asians of other nationalities — the leading consumers of shark fin soup and live reef fish. With

the proper tools and understanding, it is our hope that Southeast Asia's international school teachers will be able to help their privileged students make the ocean to dinner table connection.

By nurturing children's critical thinking and innate sense of morality, we will strive to create tools other teachers can use to sensitise kids so knowledge and reason lead them to make choices about their eating habits — choices that support a future where marine resources are used equitably and sustainably.

In less than a decade these international school students will graduate and become the dynamic young adults who energise Southeast Asia's communities. Fostering in this new class of future business and government leaders an awareness of the oceans' limits and an appreciation for marine conservation is a challenge for us all.



Back to the sea for the future

Dr Charles Birkeland¹

Source: CALYPSO LOG, June 2001

Oriental restaurants have always displayed live reef fishes and invertebrates for customers to select for their meals. But the live reef fish trade has expanded into a billion-dollar industry which has devastated stocks in the western Pacific. Oriental dietary tastes run counter to the notion of sustainability. Crabs with eggs are favoured over those without eggs and sell at higher prices. The more rare and endangered the species, the more valuable and sought-after it is as status symbol.

The Buddhist philosophy, however, is consistent with science in that all life is passed on from generation to generation and so it is important to perpetuate the species. Therefore, Buddhists sometimes take up collections to purchase live fishes and invertebrates to return them to the sea. If they cannot buy all fishes in the market, the priorities are for those carrying eggs and those representing endangered or rare species.

In the past eight months, a particular group of Buddhists in northern Taiwan has accomplished eight release events, freeing about 15 metric tons of coral reef life back to the ocean. In order to maximise survival, the leader, Wu Yi-Dah, dives along the coast and selects areas for release that are healthy coral reef habitat for the animals, and are also relatively inaccessible to fishermen. Lobsters with eggs are taken by scuba to be individually placed into holes and crevices.

On the trip I attended, the Buddhists purchased nearly a quarter million Taiwan dollars (USD 7300) worth of live fishes, sharks, crabs and molluscs. Two trucks with seawater tanks and airstones arrived at market and were loaded with about 3,500 pounds (1.6 metric tons) of living coral reef creatures. The trucks and two busloads of volunteers then headed to an isolated spot along the coast that Mr Wu had previously surveyed; there

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