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Fish and Chips

By Sara Yin

At first glance Whale Shark Gamble seems like a bad joke. The Facebook application invites participants to bet on how long a whale shark can survive in a casino and offers the winner a replica fish in a glass case as a memento.

But it soon becomes clear that the game is a cheeky campaign directed at a Singapore casino resort's plan to import a whale shark.

The winning bid three years ago by Malaysian developer Genting International to build Resorts World of Sentosa featured a marine theme park with a lagoon where visitors could swim with a whale shark (although the largest living fish, the whale shark is a filter feeder that relies primarily on plankton for food).

The government-backed venture was predicted to attract 10 million visitors by 2015, and generate s\$15 billion (HK\$79.6 billion) in tourism revenue. What Resorts World and the government hadn't expected was the degree of local opposition.

With less than a year to go before the complex is due to open on the holiday island of Sentosa, thousands of Singaporeans have joined protests against the whale shark plan. (Resorts World has already drawn controversy by capturing seven bottlenose dolphins to be used in performances at its marine attraction. The dolphins are being trained in the Philippines while the complex is being completed.)

More than 9,100 people have signed an online petition drafted by the Society For The Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and other animal welfare groups (whalesharkpetition.com), calling on the government to stop the import. About 2,000 people, mostly generation X and Y-ers, joined a Facebook group called "I will boycott Resorts World Sentosa and its Marine Life Park".

And tomorrow hundreds of university students, led by the Animal Concerns Research and Education Society (Acres) and the National University of Singapore, will debate the morality of capturing a whale shark for our entertainment.

"This is no longer about a few people campaigning for animal rights" says Jagdish Ramakrishnan, executive creative director of advertising company BBDO Singapore, which created the Whale Shark Gamble. "I think people feel that having a whale shark in Singapore would look bad."

Acres executive director Louis Ng agrees. "They say the idea is based on its tourism appeal but I think it'll negatively affect Singapore's image," he says "We don't need it for tourism."

Resorts World spokeswoman Krist Boo says the company was initially “surprised” by resistance to the idea but claims they have also received many e-mails from people saying they can’t wait to see the whale shark.

“They see the point that it is for the sake of conservation.” She says.

Some well publicised losses haven’t helped. In 2007, a whale shark mysteriously died at the enormous Georgia Aquarium in Atlanta. Months later, another whale shark died at the US marine attraction shortly after it arrived from Taiwan.

Today there are nine whale sharks held in captivity – most successfully at the Okinawa Churaumi Aquarium – but little is known about how to keep them alive.

Sarah Fowler, director of the shark specialist group at the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, doesn’t know of any whale shark that has reached maturity in captivity. “I seem to remember that all had died before doing so,” she says.

But Suzanne Gendron, foundation director of the Ocean Park Conservation Foundation, says the public is overlooking the benefits of placing animals under human care. As an example, she cites the collaborative programme started by global conservation body WWF and Chinese authorities in the 1970s to place endangered pandas under protection in enormous nature reserves.

Although whale sharks aren’t as rare as pandas were, Gendron says this is all the more reason to bring them in for study.

“The sad truth about conservation is that it isn’t until the numbers are very low that the world becomes concerned, and the animals are brought in for saving. Wouldn’t it be better to bring them in and learn more about them while there’s still a good population out there?”

Gendron won’t comment on Resorts World plans, but says facilities can be built to meet the needs of animals in the wild. She rejects the argument by the online petition that migratory whale sharks, which can grow to 12 metres, require an aquarium that can allow them to swim thousands of kilometres daily.

“They don’t need to swim 3,000 miles in a straight line,” she says. “The reason animals move from place to place is because they’re losing places to find food. A proper facility would balance their energy requirements with their intake and outtake.”

Such arguments don’t convince Singaporean oil consultant Amy Long Tian-ying. “It’s going to be cooped up. Migratory animals like that are not meant to be kept in a cage,” she says.

However, avid diver Robin Pho Lui-fung says a case can be made for the greater good through conservation education. “I believe that a balance can be reached where one shark is ‘sacrificed’ so that hundreds in the wild can be protected,” he says. “It is possible that having one whale shark in captivity can wow and awe visitors so much that they will be moved and act on protecting these beings.”

But conservationists such as Janet Walker, a spokeswoman for Hong Kong Dolphinwatch, and Clarus Chu Ping-shing, a senior marine conservation officer with WWF Hong Kong, reject the idea of keeping animals in captivity for education's sake.

"You're not learning anything when you see an animal out of captivity. Their behaviour changes once you take them out of their natural habitat," says Walker.

Still, Chu suggests there may be a compromise that can satisfy the tourism industry and increasingly eco-conscious consumers.

Instead of holding animals in a relatively small area, Chu says the eco-tourism industry could focus on expanding areas of protected natural habitat, as the mainland has done by reserving large tracts of land for its pandas.

One example is a whale shark "resort" in Donsol in the Philippines. Here, former whale shark hunters have opted for a more lucrative career in eco-tourism.

What was once a village known for capturing whale sharks is now a favourite among marine animal lovers.

"People are more concerned about animal welfare than they used to be," says Chu. "But there are still many people who enjoy their animals in a tank."