



It's a Small World After All!

By Tony Wu

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I have a quaint little habit that reflects my early struggle to learn the English language — using a dictionary. A well-worn, bulky hardcover dictionary sits on my bookshelf next to my computer; torn, frayed and dog-eared from years of use.

After a recent trip, I tried looking up the term “ecotourism”, and was somewhat surprised to find that this word isn’t in my dictionary. Perhaps I should get a new dictionary, or perhaps there’s something more meaningful to consider.

I asked a few friends to define the term ecotourism. There were some creative answers, but nothing I thought really hit the mark. Many referred to the concept of visiting nature, seeing animals in their natural habitat, and so forth. Others suggested a component of philanthropy should be involved, perhaps a donation to a worthy cause.

All the input was good, but something was still missing.

What got me on this train of thought was a recent trip to Hong Kong, when I managed to take a short trip out on the water to look for the Chinese white dolphin, *Sousa chinensis*.

I had heard about these dolphins before — about their mysterious pinkish-white skin colour, and their loss of critical habitat due to large-scale projects like the construction of the new airport and Hong Kong Disney World. I had read that the population of these mammalian cousins of ours is dwindling rapidly

in Hong Kong waters, and I thought it worth seeing them first hand.

I signed up with Hong Kong Dolphin Watch and headed out to their boat. I listened attentively to the informative briefings from the dedicated and helpful staff, and imagined in my mind’s eye what the dolphins would do if we found them. We soon reached the pier, boarded the boat and headed out in search of these pale cetaceans.

What struck me though was quite unexpected. From the top deck of the boat, I found myself not so much looking for dolphins, but staring at the considerable quantities and forms of garbage floating in the water. Styrofoam, plastic bags, PET bottles, tin cans, aerosol containers, small appliances... everything but the kitchen sink. And not just an isolated bit here or there, but streams and piles of refuse like armies of ants swarming on a molasses patch.

There were a lot of other people on the boat, perhaps 40 or so. Some seemed to notice, but for the most part, few seemed to pay attention to the unsightly pollution. Everyone was, after all, excited about the prospect of seeing dolphins.

Time passed, and we did see dolphins. I was actually the first to spot one swimming by, and took a few pictures for good measure. The dolphins actually are very pink, almost impossibly so, and are as playful as any others I’ve ever seen. The trip was superb, and I can wholeheartedly recommend it if you find yourself in Hong Kong and don’t feel like shopping yet again.

But a thought lingered in my mind as we headed back through the by-products of our civilisation. It was a nagging thought — we humans were headed back to our homes to produce more litter, some of which might end up in the home of these dolphins. I wondered momentarily what effect our garbage, both seen and unseen, had on these dolphins and other marine animals, but I quickly realised that it couldn’t possibly be good.

It was then that the concept of ecotourism came to mind.

You see, “tourism” is intended to be entertainment. We’re supposed to travel and enjoy. But unlike a family trip to some place like Disney World, where you can litter and abuse with relative impunity because the staff will clean everything up by the next morning, a trip like my journey to see the white dolphins shows that the real world doesn’t operate this way.

The lesson for me was that “ecotourism” is not just about entertainment in the Disney World sense, and it’s certainly more than taking a yuppie adventure to far-flung, pristine resorts. It is about travelling to places, whether far or near, pristine or not, to put into perspective the often adverse effect that we have had on the world, with the objective of trying to avoid making those same mistakes again.

Ecotourism is about understanding, in the words of an entertainment pioneer, that “It’s a small world after all”.