



MOUSE ATTACK

By Tony Wu

Digital illustration © Christopher Hart

When can a mouse possibly pose a danger to a shark? When the mouse's name is Mickey and is backed with hundreds of millions of dollars of investment in a new theme park.

In May 2005, executives from Hong Kong Disneyland announced their intention to serve shark fin soup - at first blush, a seemingly incongruous position for a multinational company with impeccable environmental credentials.

Founder Walt Disney was an ardent conservationist, once saying,

"Conservation isn't just the business of a few people. It's a matter that concerns us all."

Disney's Corporate Environmental Policy Statement asserts the company's intention to 'integrate natural resource conservation in all Disney's planning, development and operations'.

So what happened? In a word - money.

Disney executives initially announced proudly that 'couples can book Chinese banquet-style wedding receptions with a Mickey Mouse touch... from HK\$11,457 (approx. US\$ 1,500) a table'. Hmm... with 20 or more tables a wedding and lots of young mainland Chinese eager to be married in a fashionable new spot... you do the maths. Executives also banned a non-Disney food outlet in the theme park from offering shark fin. Were they maximising earnings from the highly profitable dish?

When conservationists asked Disney to reconsider, the answer was a proactive, immediate and firm 'No!' No room for discussion, no time to meet. 'The dish is considered an integral part of a Chinese wedding banquet,' said spokeswoman Esther Wong. 'Since Hong Kong Disneyland is located in Asia, we feel an obligation to offer a choice.'

In the ensuing public debate, Disney found itself aligned with unlikely bedfellows: the Hong Kong Federation of Restaurants and Related Trades, the Sharks Fin Trade Merchants Association and legislators representing the catering sector — not exactly Disney's traditional customer base.

For instance, Chiu Ching-Cheung, the Chairman of the Sharks Fin Trade Merchants Association, came to Disney's defence, saying among other things that sharks are not endan-

gered, and that the practice of finning sharks doesn't exist. (Coincidentally, a court in the US had just confiscated nearly 65,000 pounds of fins, representing 11,000-20,000 de-finned sharks, from a ship operated by a Hong Kong company.)

The Hong Kong government didn't weigh in much officially or publicly, perhaps due to its majority ownership of the theme park and consequent interest in the financial performance of the new Disneyland.

Meanwhile, Disney's customers — the little viewers of *Finding Nemo* and purchasers of Disney merchandise — started to speak up. Children from schools in Hong Kong signed petitions and requested a public audience with Disney leadership. Thousands of children from around the world inundated Disney executives with emails.

Yes, that's right, around the world. Kids across the globe, the bulk from Asia, joined forces to communicate their concern to Disney. Robert Iger and other top executives in headquarters heard from their core constituents, and the message was clear, 'No shark fin please.'

Kids led the charge; adults took a little longer to catch on, but when they did, they echoed the actions and views of their children. Environmental groups, parents, divers, researchers and conservationists from Asia, the United States, Australia and Europe worked in tandem to express a united, constructive view to Disney. Egos were set aside; most people contributed time and resources without remuneration.

In the end, the same executives at Disneyland who had hoped to profit from unsustainable fishing practices and superstition backed down. Citing an inability to find sustainable shark fisheries, Disney eventually replaced shark fin with abalone and other expensive, but hopefully sustainable, dishes.

The cooperation, selfless work and level-headed communication of many people around the world were key to the outcome. Teamwork carried the day.

The lesson? Kudos to the kids who dared to educate adults, and a big thank you to the grown-ups who took time from busy schedules to support the children. In many ways, Walt Disney knew what he was saying when he coined the phrase: *"It's a small world after all!"* ■