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Shark Sculptor & Conservationist Creates Educational Aquarium Exhibit to Encourage Ban on Shark Finning

by Jennifer Chesak

These days, just about anything can be considered art—from splashes of paint on a canvas to a sculpture made out of paper clips. Every now and then however, an artists' creation can make a profound difference in the way we view and interact with the world around us. Sculptor Jessica Adanich of Ocean4 enters the spotlight with "Fuzzy Sharks," an educational exhibit that challenges the audience to see sharks as in need of protection despite their predatory reputation.

"If we don't do something now," Jessica says, "we aren't going to have them around much longer." She cites shark finning, the process of removing a shark's fin for the use in shark fin soup (considered a delicacy in some countries) and discarding the rest of the shark's body—often still a live—as a major factor in species decimation. In order for their gills to extract oxygen from the water, sharks need to be in constant movement. Without their fins, they often drown, starve or are eaten by other fish.

Ocean4, Jessica's "Ocean-Meets-Art" design company, dedicated to conservation, takes a stand—against shark finning, sea turtle egg poaching and other issues—with a fresh approach.

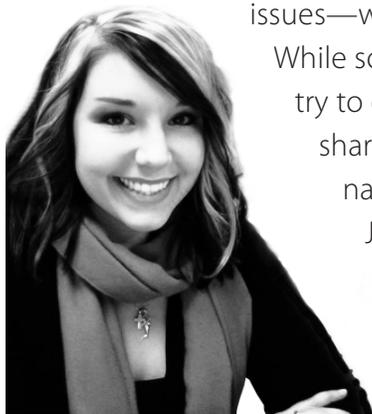
While some conservationists try to educate travelers about shark finning's barbaric nature and destruction, Jessica appeals to our innate traits. "For example, Fuzzy Sharks encourages people to think about the

way they view sharks," Jessica says. "Would you feel differently about sharks if they were soft and cuddly? Polar bears are furry, and we have a different reaction to them."

Fuzzy Sharks teaches people about biophilia, defined by Harvard biologist Edward O. Wilson as "the connections that human beings subconsciously seek with the rest of life." The opposite of a philia is a phobia. Sharks, with their sharp teeth, are often portrayed in the media as predators of humans. Such misrepresentation encourages people fear them and become apathetic about or even in favor of their destruction.

To counteract phobias and to enhance the human subconscious connection with these creatures, Jessica's exhibit features suspended 6- to 9-foot fuzzy, weighted sharks with which children and other aquarium visitors have the opportunity to interact. The size and weight gives the sharks a life-like presence, while their softness is intended to foster affection. But the sharks on display don't do all the work, says Jessica. Her project incorporates signage and other tools to help disseminate the overall message. Jessica also spends time educating aquarium staff on her exhibit and remains available for visitor demonstrations.

Changing the way we perceive sharks will ultimately help protect them, Jessica says. "Even the marketing in gift shops—with menacing-faced figurines or T-shirts—portrays them in a negative light," she adds. "We have to consider what we are selling." To accompany her Fuzzy Sharks exhibit, Jessica has also



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created a shark-based activity and coloring book that will help educate young people on the life and true characteristics of a shark and teach them respect for these important creatures.

"Aquariums and zoos are a natural place for scientists and artists to come together to promote conservation," Jessica adds. She notes that with dolphin shows and the like, aquariums are great at bringing attention to certain animals, but sometimes the objective of the event is to simply attract visitors to the establishment. Jessica's goal, however, is to not only bring attention to the aquarium but to provide visitors with an

important takeaway, one that will stick with them as they go about their daily lives. Plus, purchasable takeaways from the exhibit such as T-shirts, plush animal and workbooks help solidify the message and provide souvenirs to guests.

Ocean4 also has merchandise available as gifts for boosting aquarium membership drives.

Jessica, a graphic designer by day, originally studied industrial automotive design at the Cleveland Institute of Art, but she soon learned it wasn't really her thing. She gave product and toy design a shot, but found that area limiting, as well. "All I was doing was drawing hair dryers and coffee pots," she explains. So Jessica eventually switched to sculpture where she quickly learned how to merge her fascination with the ocean with her artistic talents. At first, she began selling animals on the side for fun, but ultimately she wanted her art to be used for a greater

good. "I wanted my subject to have a cause and to use my craftsmanship for a real purpose," she adds. Art has way of incorporating different points of view, and that factor helped Jessica tackle her mission. "We all learn in different ways," she says. "That's true whether we're visiting an aquarium or studying biology. Art is a unique and fun way to explain conservation and help instigate change."

Unfortunately, much "shark art" to date has indirectly given the creatures' a bad reputation. "After the movie Jaws aired, for example, people went out into the ocean to kill Great Whites," Jessica says.

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While chock full of shark conservation fact sheets and articles plus educational television videos and great online informational quizzes, Discovery's "Shark Week" also shows footage of violent shark attacks, Jessica continues. In reality, she

says, people are 30 times more likely to be hit by lightning and three times more likely to drown at the beach than to be attacked by a shark. Bees, wasps and snakes are actually responsible for more fatalities every year than sharks. Ocean4's Fuzzy Sharks strives to educate aquarium guests on the important role sharks play in the ecosystem of which they have been a part of for more than 400 million years.

While folks may never find themselves cuddling up to a real shark, Jessica says she hopes that actually touching the sharks in her exhibit will motivate people to protect these creatures in the same way society strives to protect "cuter" animals of the sea.