

Feedback

Dear *Feedback*,

I would like to comment on the article “Fried water beetles” by Yvonne Sadovy in the recent issue of *Porcupine!* (issue 30) p.8. Yvonne reported on an article that discussed *Cybister* water beetles consumed in Guangdong. The article, from a book by Bodenheimer (1951), noted that the water beetles were hatched in special nursery because they were rare in the province due to insufficient habitats. However, I found Bodenheimer’s rationale to be weak since these beetles live in paddy fields, pools, reservoirs and streams (Hill *et al.*, 1982; Lin, 1991) and there are still plenty of suitable habitats left in Guangdong. *Cybister* water beetles used to be abundant in Hong Kong and were captured and sold as food (Hill *et al.*, 1982). This practice seemed to have stopped locally around 1970’s but even in the early 1990’s, whenever I walked under the Bonham Road flyover in autumn mornings, I could find several individuals under each street lamp. Even in fairly urbanised Hong Kong back then, this species was not rare. Raising wild animals for food has gained a lot of popularity in mainland China and many handbooks (ranging from raising scorpions to turtles) are now for sale in bookshops. However, none of the ones I have seen mention raising *Cybister* beetles, further suggesting that this is not being carried out.

Bibliography

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Michael Lau

All at sea-Introducing Cynthia Yau

by Cynthia Yau

I have a fascination for just about anything that lives in the sea. I also tend to be happiest when I am out at sea. I was born in Hong Kong but then I moved to Britain, when I was very young, where I grew up among the lush, green countryside of rural Shropshire. I developed a keen interest in nature from an early age and used to keep tadpoles and caterpillars in my bedroom just to watch them metamorphose, much to the consternation of my long suffering mum. But it was always the sea I loved the best and even as a teenager I was telling everyone I wanted to be a marine biologist. My parents owned a restaurant and take away business and, like most second-generation immigrants, I studied hard at school so I would not have to follow in their footsteps. Instead, I chose to take a joint Honours B.Sc. in Zoology and Oceanography at the University College of Swansea, Wales.

After graduating, I felt I still did not know enough to go out into the big, wide world looking for a job. Besides, I wanted to continue in education and learn more about my field, so I applied for a Ph.D. studentship at the University of Aberdeen in Scotland for a project on the ecology of cephalopods, i.e. squid, cuttlefishes and octopuses. My supervisor, Professor Peter Boyle, had already taken on another student for a different project but I was lucky enough that he changed his mind and accepted me as his second Ph.D. student that year. At that time, squid species were rapidly becoming a more important and valuable component of capture fisheries as traditional finfish stocks were declining around the coast of Scotland, so my project was to gain a better understanding of the early life stages of cephalopods from an ecological, as well as a fishery management, perspective. My study involved a great deal of boat work in inshore waters and offshore research cruises with the Scottish Office for Agriculture and Fisheries. One memorable trip was in a force 12 gale where I was convinced the ship was going to sink and I was going to die. “*Character building*” - as my supervisor used to describe it!

I learned a great deal during my Ph.D., including some surprising new skills ranging from building plankton nets to resuscitating sharks! One of my proudest moments was the day my supervisor, a student helper and I rescued a beached basking shark. We were conducting fieldwork on the West Coast of Scotland when a fisherman told us about a shark that had been caught in some salmon gill nets and was exposed by the low tide. We managed to drag the 3-metre long, juvenile basking shark back into the water between the three of us, then proceeded to swim it around in circles to force water through its gills (fish biology lectures do come in useful). After over an hour of this treatment the shark eventually revived, gave a few sweeps of its tail, then swam off into deeper waters on its own. To this day, I have way too much respect for these animals to eat shark fin soup!

I knew a lot of the theory behind fisheries science and fisheries management, in which I had become increasingly more interested during the course of my postgraduate studies, but I wanted to know how fisheries management actually worked in practice. So, after my *viva* and a summer stint as a volunteer crew for a whale-watching company in Scotland (it was my idea of a holiday anyway), I applied to the Falkland Islands Fisheries Department for a job because they reputedly have one of the best managed fisheries in the world. My role as a Scientific Observer mainly involved collecting biological information, working and living on board foreign fishing vessels for 3-6 week periods at a time. Much of the island’s revenue is derived from the sale of fishing licenses, so Falkland Islands Government invests heavily in fisheries management to ensure the stocks are sustainable. The work itself was mentally, as well as physically, quite demanding because often I was on a ship where most of the crew spoke no English and I don’t speak any Korean, or Japanese, or Polish. After a year I was promoted to the post of Observer Co-ordinator, where I was in charge of sending other Observers out to sea and collating the fisheries data from them.

Most people’s impression of the Falklands is from images of the conflict with Argentina in 1982 showing a cold, bleak land with more sheep than people. I loved living there! What I

remember most are the amazing wildlife, the pristine landscape, seeing the full Milky Way in the clear night skies, the unbelievable productivity of the seas with more squid than you can ever imagine, and the many close friends I made. There are so many stories I can tell but I won't bore you with these, as they will fill pages and I will quickly run out of superlatives. Suffice to say, it was the experience of a lifetime.

I finally felt I had accumulated sufficient, first-hand knowledge of fisheries to be able to call myself a fisheries scientist proper, and my familiarity with the Southwest Atlantic led to subsequent contract work with Imperial College, London, participating in research cruises to assess fish stocks along the Patagonian Shelf and around the island of South Georgia in the Southern Ocean. Later, I returned to Aberdeen University to conduct postdoctoral research on deep-sea fishery resources using autonomous, baited cameras as part Professor Monty Priede's Oceanlab group. By coincidence, this resulted in scientific cruises back in the Falkland Islands and South Georgia to study the Patagonian toothfish (*Dissostichus eleginoides*). Our group worked on determining the abundance of toothfish and its role in the slope community with the aim of improving management strategies for this lucrative fishery, especially since this species is the subject of considerable conservation concern regarding illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, and subject of the debate on whether deep-sea species can be exploited in a sustainable manner.

Being a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Zoology Department, Aberdeen University, also entailed substantial teaching duties and administrating a multi-national, European Union-funded project on autonomous vehicles for deep-sea research. However, after spending too many years living in cold places, I decided not to renew my contract and went off in search of warmer climes. I was actually intending to travel around the world when my parents (now retired and with a house in the New Territories) caught up with me and urged me to apply for an advertised position at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. My family probably thought I had drifted enough and it was time for me to 'settle'. So in 2001, I got the post of Visiting Scholar at the Biology Department, HKUST, which mainly involved teaching in subjects such as Ecology, Environmental Science, Marine Biology, and Fisheries Biology, though I was also working on government-funded consultancy contracts.

I joined the Department of Ecology & Biodiversity in September 2003 as an Assistant Professor and it is like having turned full circle. I consider myself extremely fortunate to be a part of this department and to be a resident faculty at SWIMS in particular. Some of my earliest memories of Hong Kong were of catching shore crabs and digging up clams for the congee pot....probably not recommended these days, and strictly not allowed at Cape D'Aguiar of course (because of the marine reserve)! But I do enjoy teaching our students about the diverse local marine fauna and sharing information with them. The marine environment here is very different to those of Britain and the Southwest Atlantic, but I hope to be able to bring my previous experiences into use and conduct research on local fisheries resources. At present, I have projects focusing on the ecology and fisheries of cephalopods and have begun work on updating the checklist of species from the

region in collaboration with the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

I still seize every opportunity to go out to sea, such as by taking part in regular trawl surveys of Hong Kong waters, and even to the extent of incorporating boat fieldwork into the Biological Oceanography course I direct. Oh, and in case anyone is wondering....yes, I *do* get seasick!



Fig. 1. Cephalopod (*Octopus membranaceous*) research at SWIMS – but who is studying who ?

VERTEBRATES

Big fierce animals in Hong Kong

by Richard T. Corlett

In his classic textbook, *Why Big Fierce Animals are Rare*, Paul Colinvaux (1978) explains why large carnivores necessarily live at much lower densities than their prey. For most of the world, however, it is not ecological necessity, but direct human impact that explains the rarity – or, in an increasing number of places, complete absence – of big fierce animals. They are killed because they threaten us or our livestock, or because they look as if they might, or simply because they are “bad animals”. The history of China could be deduced from a comparison of large carnivore distribution maps at intervals over the last 10,000 years. Robert Marks (1998) attempts this for tigers in southern China in his book, *Tigers, Rice, Silk and Silt*.

If big fierce animals – BFAs from now on – are history in Hong Kong, why concern ourselves with them? The fuss caused by one juvenile crocodile in Yuen Long shows that even the most fervent proponent of reintroduction is unlikely