

MARK CARWARDINE



On the wild thoughts that won't let him sleep. This month:

Leave whale sharks alone

Talk about bad ideas. The so-called East African Whale Shark Trust (EAWST) plans to capture whale sharks, keep them in an enclosure off the south coast of Kenya and charge tourists US\$100 each to swim with them.

It's immoral and misguided on so many counts, I hardly know where to begin.

The sharks will be caught by ropes lassoed around their tails, held in the water with weighted buoys "until they fall into a state of tonic immobility" and then dragged to the enclosure. The plan is to have two sharks in place by November this year. Every six months, the captive sharks will be released and a new pair caught and kept in the enclosure.

The EAWST claims that the plan is to generate funds for whale shark conservation (presumably, money for the EAWST itself) in order to set up a potential breeding programme, to do research and to promote awareness.

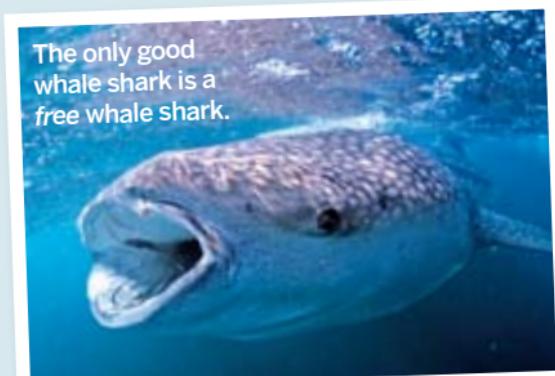
Since most of the whale sharks off the Kenyan coast are immature males, a captive breeding programme seems pretty fanciful (I think they must have missed some of their biology lessons).

And research on a couple of whale sharks in captivity isn't exactly a conservation priority – surely, tackling the

growing problem of whale-shark hunting off the coast of Kenya is considerably more important?

If tourists want to see whale sharks, they can be observed in more than two dozen locations around the world – as Tom Peschak demonstrated in his portfolio in the June issue. Searching for them in the wild takes a little more effort than in an artificial enclosure, but that's a good thing, because if you have

The only good whale shark is a free whale shark.



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to work hard to see wildlife, you appreciate it more.

As for promoting awareness, any group that thinks it's a good idea to keep whale sharks in captivity should not be allowed to educate anyone about anything.

Mark Carwardine is a zoologist, photographer, writer, conservationist and BBC TV presenter.