

THE STORY OF A TOWN WHICH EVOLVED FROM FISHING WHALE-SHARKS TO ECO-TOURISM.

This is the story of a little Mexican boy called Pablo. Living in the streets of beautiful Cancun, all he saw were tourists, tourists and more tourists. He was raised up knowing that those people, whose appearance turned from white skinned to red patched one, were the ones who could bring money to the country. During the day, Pablo walked around the white-sanded beaches, and tried to convince foreigners to try the fish of his fathers' restaurant. The most famous dish was whale-shark meat, which attracted the most curious and wealthy. All the family was involved in the business, the men would fish, and the women would then cook or sell the meat to export it. However, this species was less and less abundant, as over-fishing started to seriously endanger whale-shark population.

One morning, during Pablo's long, sweaty, strays along the beach, he approached a quite European looking family. He enthusiastically introduced himself, and, just like every day, he went on giving the same memorized speech about his fathers' restaurant. He would start by explaining how close by the restaurant was, and how delicious and spicy the food was. Then, when people's attention would start fading, he would add that they served one of the most precious fish meat of one of the most exotic fish in the planet. He even had paper pictures of the animal itself. All this, insisting that the whale-sharks were caught freshly and daily by his own family.

However, this family didn't react the way he expected. They did not ignore him, nor accept his offer. Instead, the family, amazed by the animals' appearance, insisted they would pay a big sum for getting in the boat with his family and watch these animals alive. Confused but quite happy for the amount suggested, Pablo ran up to his father's restaurant and explained the situation. The whole family was shocked but agreed to do so as the money they would earn would almost sum up one whole week of serving food. Without even knowing, the Pablo and his family were about to try out the concept of Ecotourism.

The next morning, the family together with Pablo and his father left form the harbor early in the morning to encounter the Whale sharks. They were so mesmerized by the experience, that they even left an extra tip for both of them. Soon the word got spread, and more and more tourists came asking for the same excursion. Pablo's family had to start asking other fishermen to join the new business, as they needed more and more boats to fulfill the demand.

The whale-shark fishing community, when they saw how profitable this new approach was, started offering the same services. It turns out that whale-sharks were not fished anymore, but instead were cherished and valued alive. The love for these curiously-patterned and massive-mouthed sharks grew, and the importance of coming up with a sustainable way for boat watching them started to grow and is currently still developing.



Photo 1. Taken by Elena Basilio in Isla Mujeres, Mexico. 2016.

