

Protected shark bait anxious about predator's status

By Ruth Ostrow

LOOK at those teeth, my daughter exclaims, as the huge sharks swim overhead. It's a breathtaking view, standing underneath the creatures in the Sydney Aquarium.

My daughter has nagged and nagged the whole time we've been visiting Sydney to go see the most loathed and fearsome creatures of the sea. But wouldn't you prefer to have a lovely ice-cream on Bondi beach? No I want to see the sharks.

But don't you want to go to Luna Park? How about a trip on the ferry? No, I want to see the sharks. And she has finally won.

Now they swim around us, above us, even beneath us in parts, circling menacingly, their teeth sharp, eyes narrowed, surveying us in our safe cocoon.

I can't leave. I am mesmerised, following the great beasts as they swim, elegant, strangely fragile, hoping to catch a glimpse of their mating rituals, feeding rituals, anything at all.

But after a while I begin to feel unnerved, alarmed, a sense of panic rising in my stomach. And slowly I realise what it is. Not the beasts, so terrifying with their razor teeth and bodies built as killing machines. It's the size of the tank that worries me.

Suddenly I've shifted from a human perspective, empathising instead with the great monsters. My soul has joined them in their underwater prison. And I'm alarmed at how cramped and small their home is, as they circle and circle and circle again.

Trapped. Captive. Like gelded stallions. Their legendary wildness cruelly immunised so we can watch them.

Flashlights keep hitting the glass. I wonder if it hurts their eyes, the torture of carrying a stain everywhere they look. Click ... click ... click. They kill for food.

We are the real predators capturing, killing, maiming for pleasure, for sport and self-justified means. Mummy, can people swim with them? my daughter asks. Swimming with sharks. Like Dances with Wolves, that wonderful film title expressing the dormant desire in every human soul to run with the wild things.

Ironically, two movies we watched the previous night in our hotel room, high above the natural world, captured this.

The first was *The Missing*, where lead actor Tommy Lee Jones, like Kevin Costner in *Wolves*, turns Indian, escapes the cage of domesticity and runs off into the wilderness to live with his shaman brethren.

The main character, a Christian woman played by Cate Blanchett, engages the help of Lee, who plays her estranged father, to track and rescue her own daughter who's been kidnapped.

The camera adores Jones singing and chanting like a medicine man, raising energy, communing with an eagle, the way it adored Costner jumping around the fire, wild, free, dancing with the wolves who watched on.

Meanwhile, in the next movie we watched, *The Last Samurai*, Tom Cruise had turned Samurai. In yet another take on the same theme, a tormented soldier ditches his Western identity to join the savage but sacred sect of Japan's ancient, revered warriors as they dress in their animal armour, horns glinting in the sun, and unleash their primitive tribal lore on the enemy.

Back in the aquarium, standing under the shadows of these massive bodies as they swim above, I can hear the movie producer say, "She's turned shark", as I dive in, open the cage door to the surrounding harbour, and lead the great fish out to sea.

Jungians believe that we all have a primal need to follow the animal inside us -- into the sea, into the sky, into the wilderness.

The whole notion of werewolf and vampire comes from a mythological acknowledgement of the inner wolf, inner bat, half-human, half-beast, the untamed and primitive parts of ourselves yearning to be set free.

French writer and philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) coined the term the noble savage. But what is behind this fantasy of rising from our warm domestic beds, to go Indian, go feral, go werewolf, go free?

It is a pitch for happiness and psychological health according to Rousseau, who believed from his studies that those in more primitive cultures were the happiest. Those who lead simple lives in nature and had the wild aspect of themselves in balance, were content. He believed that it was society that corrupted man's natural goodness. The character Tarzan was an adaptation of his theories.

Present-day French philosopher, and author of the brilliant book *Status Anxiety*, Alain de Botton, quoted Rousseau on *Compass* last Sunday, talking about the need for all of us to reassess the misery we bring on ourselves by denying the innate, the wild, the simple, and primitive in ourselves, opting instead for competitive Western values where we are defined and confined by achievement, money and their counterpart -- envy.

The metaphor is clear to me as the great sharks circle above.

We keep our sharks -- both the real ones, and the untamed parts of our animal selves -- caged, repressed, condemned as evil, locked up, denied, till they atrophy and die. It is only by dancing with wolves or swimming with sharks, from time to time, that our souls can be set free.

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First published in *The Weekend Australian* SAT 26 JUN 2004