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HeadLine: Go on, feed the sharks, they're babes

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TWENTY baby sharks have been put together in a pool for display at the Underwater World Singapore (UWS) – to help change the frightening image of these much-maligned creatures of the deep.

Visitors can use a stick to feed fish to five different species of sharks – leopard, bamboo, white tip, black tip and nurse. Bamboo sharks can grow up to 90cm while nurse sharks can reach 5m. The 20 sharks are all part of the UWS' shark-breeding programme which started when the aquarium opened in May 1991.

Professor Leo Tan, director of special projects at the National University of Singapore's science faculty, was the guest of honour at yesterday's launch, where children from St Hilda's and Woodlands primary schools fed the sharks and took part in workshops.

Prof Tan said it is important that children who grow up in the city are not divorced from nature.

Sharks, he said, play a vital role in the ocean's eco-system. "Man eating sharks is more dangerous than man-eating sharks," he said in reference to shark's fin soup, a popular dish in many Chinese restaurants here and in Asia.

"They are the doctors of the sea. Their role in the food chain is not to keep us out of the water but to ensure all the fish we eat are healthy as they eat only fish which cannot swim fast enough," he said.

Marine biologist Anthony Chang, the curator at UWS, hopes the exhibit will help visitors see sharks as fellow occupants of the planet and not as something to be feared. "They will look at the baby sharks and see how fragile they are."

He pointed out that while the sharks in the nursery are known to be mild, black tip and white tip sharks have been known to bite – but only when provoked or when there is blood in the water.

When the 20 sharks become too big for the nursery, they will be moved to larger tanks or exchanged for other fishes with aquariums or zoos around the world.

Feeding times for the sharks are at 11.30am and 4.30pm daily.

The UWS yesterday also pledged its support for the United Nations' International Year of Biodiversity 2010. For more information, go to www.underwaterworld.com.sg/conservation.htm