



by LIM SU LIN

PHOTOS: KEE ALFIAN

**A**S A teenager, Dr Louisa Shobhini Ponnampalam was already certain that a career in marine biology was what she wanted. While other girls were getting obsessed with boy-bands and make-up, she instead gravitated towards collecting dolphin bangles and earrings, and other such paraphernalia.

Her love for marine science has taken her to distant shores, from travelling halfway around the world to enrol at the University of Hawaii in Hilo to pursuing a doctorate degree at the University Marine Biological Station Millport, a tiny island off the coast of western Scotland.

After graduating, Louisa returned home to focus on marine mammal conservation in Malaysia, where there was a ripe potential to make a difference. This year, she became the first Malaysian to be awarded a Pew Fellowship in Marine Conservation, a competitive international grant for marine conservation. The accolade is a strong testament to her capabilities as a scientist and marine conservationist.

**Not your average scientist**

Yet, on our first meeting at her office in the Institute of Ocean and Earth Sciences in Kuala Lumpur, my first impression was that she was not your average academician.

It wasn't just the way she was dressed (in a crisp polo shirt and denim skirt) or the silver manta ray earrings and colourful "awareness" bands on her wrist that caught me off-guard.

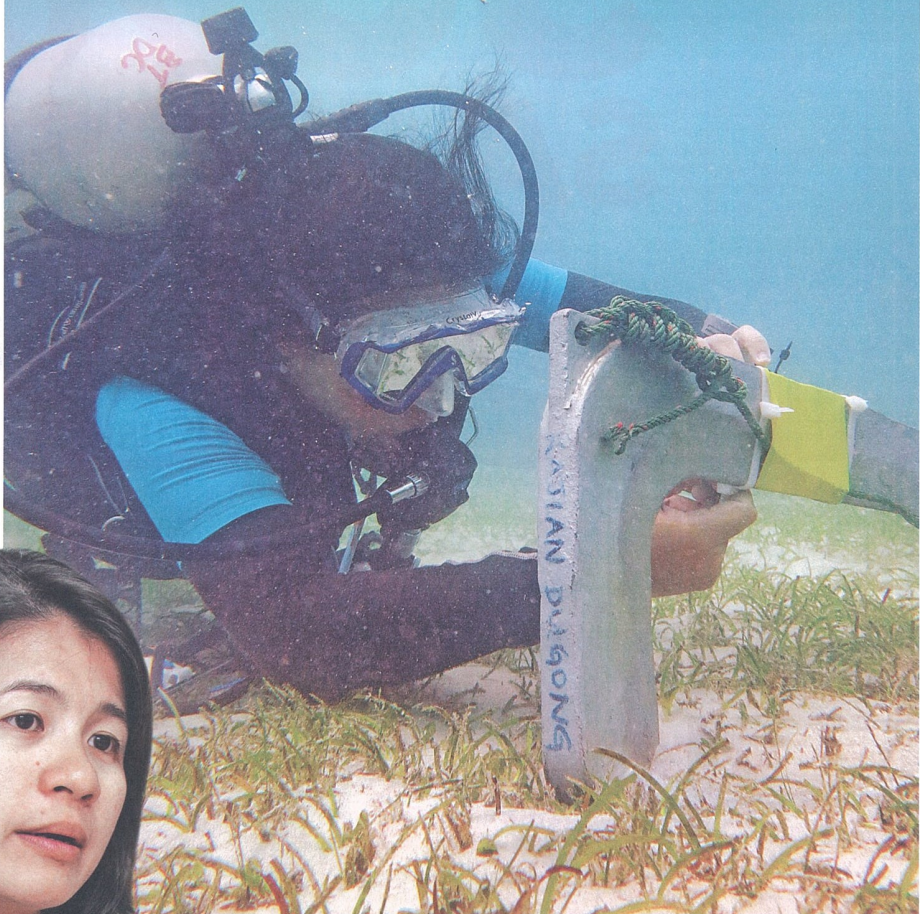
No, beyond her attire, Louisa is strikingly spunky and sharp-witted. As we chatted in her office quarters, I couldn't help but warm to her as she reflected on the years she spent studying marine mammals.

One might imagine her work to be something akin to television personalities like Jeff Corwin or the late Steve Irwin, but there is a real gritty element behind it. When not in office churning out surveys and reports, she goes on frequent trips to Perak and Langkawi to cull data on the resident population groups of Indo-Pacific finless porpoises and humpback whales. Fieldwork hours are long and often indiscriminate of public holidays and weekends.

"It's definitely not a fairy-tale life," she says, with a wry grin.

# The damsel of the sea

Among her friends, Dr Louisa Shobhini Ponnampalam is remembered fondly as 'the Dolphin Girl'. It is an apt moniker for someone as passionate about the sea as she is



■ Louisa collecting data from the seabed



SHARIL AMIN/FOCUSWEEK



Education on all levels is crucial. We can only conserve what we understand or love."

■ Louisa's passion for sea mammals and conservation shines through in the way she speaks about these subjects which are close to her heart

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## Milestones

> 2004

Earned a Commonwealth Scholarship to undertake a PhD in Habitat Use and Conservation of Small Dolphins at the University Marine Biological Station Millport, Scotland. During this time, she specialised in the ecology and conservation of marine mammals.

> 2009

Returned to Malaysia and started work as research fellow at the Institute of Ocean and Earth Sciences at Universiti Malaya.

> 2010

Started the Langkawi Dolphin Research Project, which studies Indo-Pacific finless porpoises and humpback dolphins, two groups that have been under-represented in scientific studies.

> 2012

Co-founded the MareCet Research Organisation as a way to increase scientific knowledge, conservation efforts and raise public awareness toward dugongs and other marine mammals. It is the first non-profit organisation of its kind.

> 2014

Awarded the Pew Fellowship in Marine Conservation to conduct research on Malaysia's dugong population, focusing on the islands off Johor's east coast. Industrial development in these areas has changed the coastline, disrupting the marine environment and populations. Louisa's grant will be used to identify the areas frequented by the remaining dugong population, as the first step towards protecting them.



Louisa's work also involves scrutinising the remains of dead sea animals that wash ashore to ascertain the cleanliness of their territorial waters

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### Learning from sea mammals

Louisa's work focuses largely on marine mammal conservation, in particular, dolphins and whales. When asked why she is fascinated with these particular species, she explains that the marine mammals are "sentinels of the sea" as their movement patterns, and even their bodies, can tell a story of what is happening in the watery depths.

"They (the animals) become more susceptible to disease when there are contaminants flowing into the ocean. If a certain area is polluted with a contaminant, it affects the health of the entire population over time. Their calves may be born deformed. Over time, the population would decrease."

"When the bodies of these dead animals wash ashore, histology tests show that there are plastic bags, bottle caps and other trash in their stomachs," she adds. "If they are in trouble, then so are we (humans), because we depend so much on the sea as a source of food."

### Sharing her discoveries

Academicians deserve much respect for breaking ground on issues that change the cause for humanity. However, it is often the case that much of their expertise and knowledge do not get shared beyond their own community.

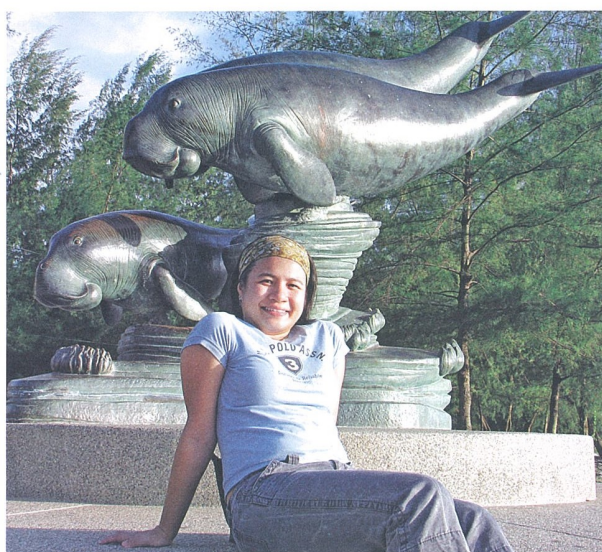
That's why Louisa has striven to take her work beyond the ivory tower.

In 2012, she teamed up with a colleague to found MareCet (a combination of the words "Mare", which is Latin for "ocean", and "Cetacean", which is the scientific term for the grouping of whales, dolphins and porpoises). Both of them had shared similar frustrations about being "trapped" in a system that lacked channels for raising awareness about conservation.

According to Louisa, MareCet aims to bridge the gap between policymakers, academics and the public. "We want to be an NGO that spreads information about the environment and conservation through our own experiences and work," she explains.

The organisation, a non-profit dedicated to research, conservation and increasing public awareness of marine mammals, is the first of its kind in Malaysia. One way they have been doing this is through hosting fund-raising lecture series. Last year saw the launch of the first series on marine mammals. This year, to raise interest levels, they invited colleagues from different branches of marine studies to share their knowledge on a plethora of organisms and ecosystems from seahorses to coral reefs.

What's the best way to bring knowl-



Dugongs, among other sea mammals, are close to Louisa's heart



On a fieldwork assignment, Louisa listens for the high-pitched sounds that dolphins make to communicate to each other

edge to the public? "Education on all levels is crucial. We can only conserve what we understand or love," says Louisa.

"At the ministerial level, there needs to be a better grasp of environmental issues and a collaborative effort to promote the importance of having a clean and healthy environment.

"Public awareness is key. The government must take the lead in setting up policies to remind the *rakyat* that resources are dwindling; that certain species of fish are going extinct; and that the toxins carelessly thrown into rivers end up being absorbed into the ecosystem, eventually coming back to us."

### The way to make a difference

When quizzed further on why she decided to take up conservation work, Dr Louisa pauses before she speaks. When she does, her customary composure is replaced by a tone of earnestness.

"Collecting data helps inform research, but informing people is what's more important. It's about taking the information, breaking it down and convincing the public why your findings are important and what needs to be done."

"At the end of the day, the animals are just at the receiving end," she stresses. "It's really a human problem. Solutions can only come through changing people's attitudes and mind-sets rather than trying to fix the animals themselves."

Furthermore, she strongly believes that even if the older generation is set in its ways, change can still happen in young minds. She encourages youth who are interested to volunteer at MareCet to experience working in outreach activities. By equipping them with a proper understanding of ecological issues, she wants to help raise a generation of nation-builders who care enough to make a difference.

The road has certainly not been an easy nor conventional one for Louisa. Along the way, she has had a fair share of insensitive comments being made about her work, but over time, she has learnt to shrug off the naysayers. Key to this is learning to manage expectations and reminding herself of the reasons why she started in the first place.

"I have overcome a lot of adversities and I will keep doing it for as long as I can," she says.

"I cannot guarantee that I will not ever feel fed up. But I can almost guarantee that I will keep on going. At the end of the day, it's about (seeing) how many people's mindsets I have changed for the better. How many kids did I inspire to follow their dreams in this field? How many policies have I influenced so that in this country, something can be done more effectively? Those are the milestones by which I would gauge the success of my career."

One can't help but applaud this spirited lady, who has tackled one milestone after another to follow through with her dreams. **Focusweek**

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