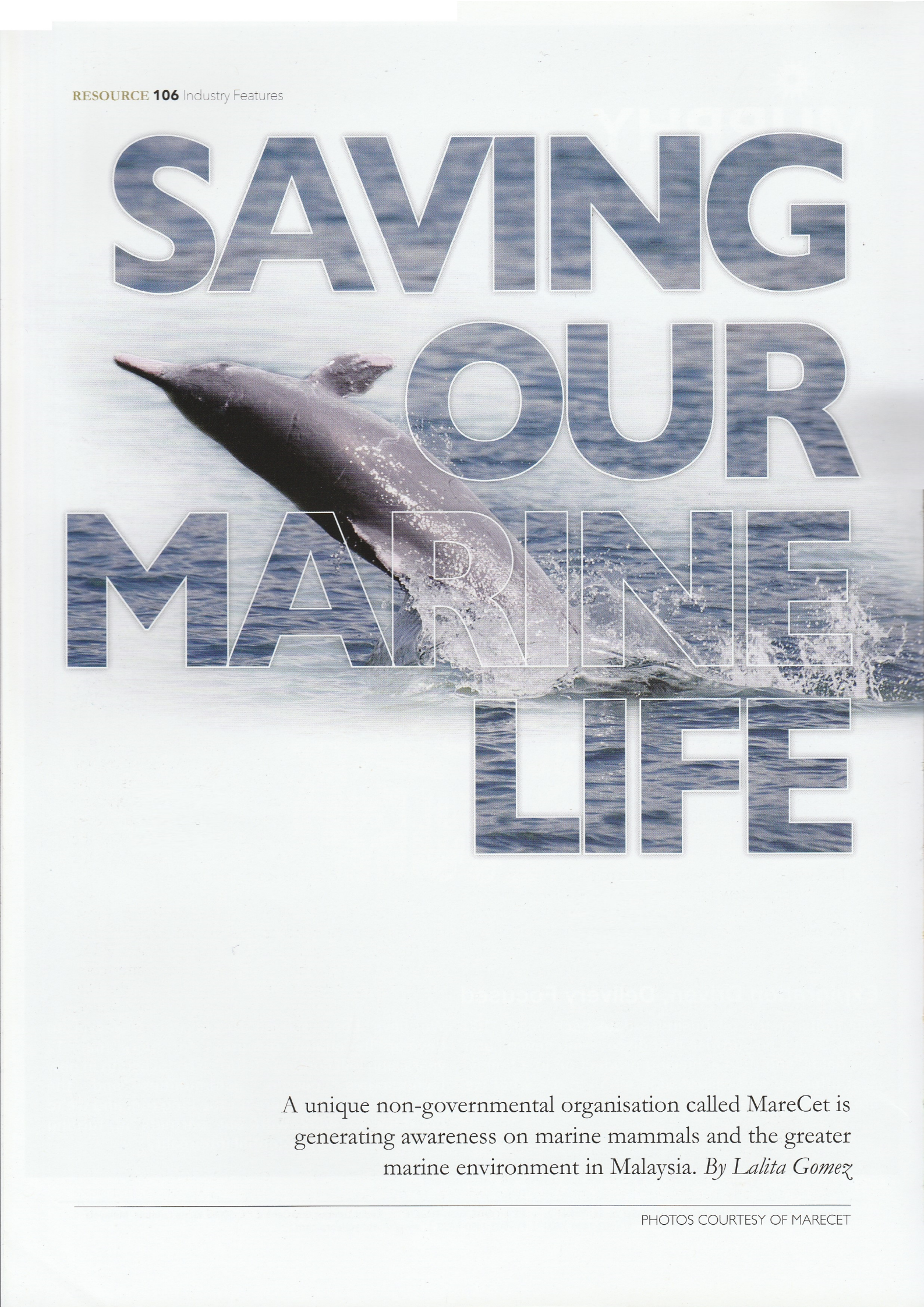


RESOURCE

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A photograph of a dolphin leaping from the water, creating a splash. The dolphin is dark grey and is captured in mid-air, with its body arched. The water is a deep blue with white foam from the splash. Overlaid on the image is the title 'SAVING OUR MARINE LIFE' in large, bold, blue-outlined letters. The text is arranged in four lines: 'SAVING' on the first line, 'OUR' on the second line, 'MARINE' on the third line, and 'LIFE' on the fourth line. The letters are semi-transparent, allowing the dolphin and water to be seen through them.

SAVING OUR MARINE LIFE

A unique non-governmental organisation called MareCet is generating awareness on marine mammals and the greater marine environment in Malaysia. *By Lalita Gomez*



“Nine in 10 Malaysians have no idea that there are marine mammals in our country. We have dolphins, whales, porpoises, and yet so little is known about them here.”

– Dr Louisa Ponnampalam, co-founder of MareCet –



Dawn has arrived. The sun's rays struggle to break through the haze, casting a warm glow that radiates through the atmosphere and rests in gentle sparkles over the waters' surface. The team is heading out on yet another day of survey work to search for dolphins off the coast of Kuala Sepetang near Taiping.

The water appears calm and there's nothing else out here barring a few fishing trawlers. And then someone yells "sighting!" as a pod of dolphins breaks the surface, revealing a mother and calf on their morning forage. They are accompanied by 10 to 15 others searching for fish and crustaceans. Every so often, they surface for a few seconds before disappearing into the depths of the murky brown waters. These are the Indo-Pacific humpback dolphins, magnificent greyish-pink creatures that inhabit the estuaries and coastal waters of Malaysia. They share their home with the Irrawaddy dolphin and the Indo-Pacific finless porpoise.

Our marine warriors

Dr Louisa Ponnampalam, a research scientist at the University of Malaya, and Fairul Izmal Jamal Hisne, an Environmental Consultant with one of the leading environmental consultancies in the country, co-founded MareCet (pronounced ma-rei-set), the only non-profit,

non-governmental organisation based in Malaysia that is focused on the research and conservation of marine mammals. It was established in 2012 but was in the workings since 2008. That was when both Louisa and Fairul had returned to Malaysia upon completing their studies, both in marine sciences. Neither knew of the other but they shared the same vision of applying what they had learnt to conservation efforts here.

Like a lot of little girls, Louisa's passion for marine mammals was born out of her obsession with dolphins. From age 10, she fantasised about becoming a National Geographic-type explorer or researcher. Soon after completing her Form Five exams, she went off to the University of Hawaii to make her dreams a reality. Fairul's obsession with marine mammals began when he witnessed his first whale migration. His journey to achieving his dreams, however, was a little more challenging as he had to convince his family that this was the right path for him. After a little detour, he eventually found himself at the University of Waikato in New Zealand pursuing a degree in marine sciences.

"We met each other when we both applied for the same job," says Fairul. "I got the job on account of being cheaper," he laughs. Louisa secured a position with the



University of Malaya instead, but they began collaborating on dolphin research projects. From there, they developed a long-lasting friendship. It was frustration with the lack of action and organisational bureaucracy more than anything else that drove them to form MareCet.

"We wanted to do something concrete, start making some changes locally with regards to conservation of marine mammals, largely an ignored science here in Malaysia" says Louisa. "And while there are a few groups working on marine mammal research, there isn't a dedicated NGO in this country looking into marine mammal conservation per se".

Dolphins and whales are considered bio-indicators of an environment – how healthy the sea is or not – as they accumulate toxins in their body which can be measured. Necropsy and biopsy samples of these animals can reveal how pristine the environment is. Simply put, marine mammals tell a story people can ill afford to ignore as they eat the same things humans do – fish, squid, prawns and the like.

"Our objective is to undertake research and use our findings to raise awareness and provide the government with data they can use to enhance protection of the marine environment. We also want to provide an avenue for aspiring Malaysians keen on marine mammalogy to gain hands-on learning experiences and hone their ambitions," says Fairul.

Their vision is reflected in the organisation's name; Mare is Latin for "ocean" and Cet is a truncation of the word "cetacean", which is the collective name for whales, dolphins and porpoises. In a short span of two years, MareCet has proven to be an organisation that walks the talk and despite comprising a comparatively small team, they can already claim many successes.

This includes their flagship programme, the Langkawi Dolphin Research, now four years in the running. The project is focused on the distribution, abundance and ecology of two commonly occurring species on the is-

land, which are the Indo-Pacific finless porpoises and Indo-Pacific humpback dolphin (though they also record the presence of other less frequently occurring species such as the Irrawaddy dolphin, Indo-Pacific bottlenose dolphin and Bryde's whale).

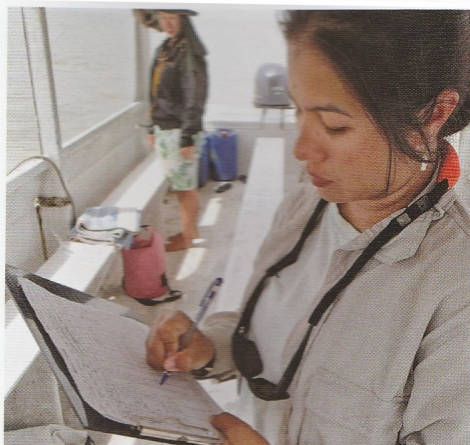
"We have collected up to three years' worth of visual data and two years' worth of acoustic data to make an estimation of the number of dolphins and porpoises around Langkawi, and to decipher their distribution patterns and extent of overlap with human activities. Now that we've established a baseline, the next step will be monitoring to see how human activities are affecting these marine mammal populations," says Louisa.

In July 2013, they began the Matang Dolphin Research in Taiping, thanks to the Ocean Park Conservation Foundation Hong Kong and Universiti Malaya Research Grant. Bimonthly, boat surveys are conducted to study population abundances, distribution and habitat use, movement and ranging patterns, habitat preferences of the cetacean community in Matang and any human-dolphin interactions, as a result of fishing activities.

"It's funny but when we tell people about our research in Langkawi and Matang, the first reaction is always disbelief. They will travel to other countries like Australia to catch a glimpse of whales and dolphins when they are here in our own backyard," says Louisa. "Common perception when a marine mammal is spotted in our waters is that it is lost. One of our goals is to change this perception – the fact is our Malaysian waters is home."

They also initiated the National Marine Mammal Stranding Network by organising a roundtable discussion with stakeholders in 2009. The Network was launched in 2013 by the Department of Fisheries Malaysia and is the first of its kind here.

"Since it was established, there have been a dozen stranding incidents that we know of, and possibly more that we don't. The biggest challenge is to get the government and other stakeholders more involved in our



research work. The data we can get from these strandings helps us understand what is happening in our own backyard," says Fairul.

"We once took a half day off work to drive up to Pahang after one of our local contacts informed us of a whale stranding at one of the fishing villages. We got there around midnight, collected our samples and then drove back. Those were the days ...," laughs Fairul, "We've improved since."

It is obvious they can't continue this on their own, limited as they are by resources, time and manpower. As new kids on the block, one of the biggest challenges they face is getting their voices heard by local veterans in this field.

"Our goal is to enhance marine conservation and research in the country. We are here, we are willing and eager to act. We are craving opportunities to collaborate. We have achieved much these past two years with few resources and a small dedicated team. Can you imagine what we could achieve if we were all working together?" says Louisa.

Although home support has been somewhat lacking, MareCet has hung in there with help from international marine conservation organisations and their peers. It hosted the Third Southeast Asian Marine Mammal Symposium (SEAMAM III), in Langkawi on March 3 to 10, 2013. This was a follow-up to the previous symposiums held in the Philippines in 1995 and 2002, and brought together scientists from 17 countries – Thailand, Malaysia,



Brunei, Cambodia, Hong Kong, Japan, Vietnam, China, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Canada, Myanmar, Australia and the US.

"The highlight of that was the attendance of Dr Randall Reeves, one of the world's most experienced marine mammal researchers and current Chair of the IUCN Species Survival Commission's Cetacean Specialist Group," says Fairul.

Ultimately, the symposium gave the NGO an opportunity to highlight its research on a larger platform. In 2013, Louisa was invited to join the International Union for the Conservation of Nature's (IUCN) Species Survival Commissions (SSC) Cetacean and Sirenia Specialist Groups and was elected Vice-chairperson of the International Consortium for Marine Conservation. She joins a group of elite scientists in promoting and facilitating scientific research and conservation of cetaceans, dugongs and manatees. She is also the first Malaysian ever to win the Pew Fellowship, a prestigious award for Marine Conservation, and will head to San Francisco this November for the Pew Fellows Meeting. She has also been nominated for the Future for Nature Award 2014.

Says Fairul, "We would like to see MareCet as a full-fledged NGO with vast resources to continue research, develop strategies and policies, and eventually establish an office, with like-minded souls looking to make a big impact in a good way."



Floating Exhibition (FLEX)

MareCet's first floating exhibition (FLEX) is in the pipeline as part of an awareness campaign to share their research findings with the general public. Located in Langkawi, Kedah, FLEX will describe cetaceans, their behaviour and the threats they face through interactive exhibits suitable for all ages. Among the highlights include life-sized models of selected cetaceans, audio clips of real cetaceans and exciting video footage of cetaceans including a birthing of a baby dolphin! MareCet is looking for partnerships to get FLEX up and running. If you are interested please contact Dr. Louisa Ponnampalam or Fairul Izmal Jamal Hisne at partner.marecet@gmail.com. For more information see www.marecet.org