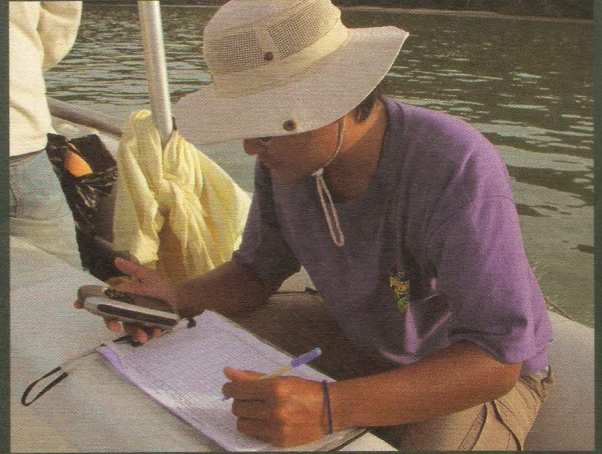


Dolphinitely Exciting! The Marecet Research Organization, Malaysia's First Marine Mammal- Centric Non-Profit Ngo



—
STORY
Vivian Kuit,
Ng Jol
Ern, Louisa
Ponnampalam

Ding-ding-ding-ding! The adrenaline rush begins as the sound of the tank banger indicates that the observer onboard has just sighted something in the water. A dorsal fin breaks the surface of the water, and a chuffy sound of a blow can be heard, accompanied by a whiff of fishy smell. "Dolphins, about 200 m away, three o'clock", announces one of the observers, and the research vessel proceeds to approach the pod slowly....

Remaining to be a delightful surprise to those who have the rare opportunity to encounter them in the wild, they are the cetaceans (whales, dolphins and porpoises) that never cease to amaze people.

Cetaceans are marine mammals in the order Cetacea that spend their lives in marine or freshwater environments and are divided into two groups, the baleen whales and the toothed whales. Like us, they are warm-blooded animals, breathe through lungs, give birth to live young and nurse their young. Despite the fact that at least 27 species of whales, dolphins, porpoise and dugong have been recorded in Malaysian waters, most people are actually surprised to learn that cetaceans do live in our tropical waters of Malaysia. Now you might be thinking to yourself, "There are dolphins in Malaysia?" Well, you would not be the only one! Some of the commonly found species here in Malaysia include the Indo-Pacific humpback dolphin with pink pigmentation as they mature, the inconspicuous Indo-Pacific finless porpoise, the Irrawaddy dolphin with a small stubby dorsal fin, and the Indo-Pacific bottlenose dolphin. In addition, the long-beaked common dolphin, spinner dolphin, pantropical spotted dolphin, Bryde's whale and dugong are also sighted in these waters.

Undoubtedly charismatic and lovable globally, marine mammals, especially cetaceans, are the ideal flagship species and iconic mascot to raise public

awareness regarding the issues occurring in our marine environment. As top predators in the marine food chain, cetaceans are indicators of the health of our seas. Unfortunately, it is deeply concerning that these extraordinary animals are facing various threats from human activities. Intense fishing activities have resulted in the depletion of the animals' prey resources and also higher risks of entanglements in fishing nets. Marine mammals that are entangled in fishing gears often sustain injuries as they struggle to free themselves, and often die from stress and suffocation if they are unable to surface to breathe air. The increasing number of boats operating also puts the animals at risk of injuries from propeller cuts and blunt force trauma due to collision with boats. Some have also been found to be killed by ingestion of large amounts of marine debris such as plastics and ropes in their stomachs. Sonar and seismic exploration activities can cause hearing loss and internal injuries, resulting in the animals suffering a slow and painful death. The fate of these animals, as a result of all these human-induced issues worldwide, serves as a reminder for us to rethink how we are managing our oceans.

Realising the need to further advance marine mammal research and promote marine conservation in Malaysia, in 2012, two young Malaysians, Dr. Louisa Ponnampalam and Fairul Izmal Jamal Hisne co-founded the MareCet Research Organization. MareCet (pronounced ma-rei-set) is the first and only non-profit, non-governmental organisation in Malaysia that is dedicated solely to the research and conservation of marine mammals in Malaysia. The name MareCet is derived from the word Mare (meaning ocean, in Latin) and Cet (a shortened form of the word Cetacean), and signifies the two main focus of MareCet, which are the ocean, in general and marine mammals, in particular.



Through various research projects and awareness programs, MareCet is committed to increasing scientific knowledge, implementing conservation actions, strengthening policies, and generating awareness on marine mammals and the marine environment. MareCet currently runs two cetacean research projects; The Langkawi Dolphin Research (LDR) project is MareCet's flagship research project while the Matang Dolphin Research (MDR) is the organization's new project in the Matang Mangrove Forest Complex in Perak. As its name suggests, LDR is conducted in the waters surrounding the Langkawi Archipelago, one of Malaysia's top tourism destinations and now a UNESCO World Geopark. The research team sets out to Langkawi on a bi-monthly basis to study the diversity, abundance, distribution and behaviour of the cetaceans found there. MareCet also conducts interviews with the local community, particularly fishermen and tour operators to understand human-dolphin interactions and their perceptions on conservation. The information, in turn, will help us to better understand the ecology of these magnificent creatures through the assessment and monitoring of their populations, and develop conservation strategies for their protection and that of their habitat.

MareCet also conducts Communication, Education, & Public Awareness (CEPA) programs to improve marine education and awareness amongst the local community and general public. Scheduled to be officially launched at the end of 2013 in Langkawi, the Langkawi Dolphin Floating Exhibition (FLEX) is an exhibition on a custom-made floating platform for visitors to learn more about marine mammals and marine conservation. The semi-interactive exhibition consisting of life-sized models of a whale and dolphins, informational posters, 3D exhibits and a sound room will have guided tours.

The guides will mainly be youth volunteers who will be given capacity training. From time to time, MareCet also organizes and participates in various types of events such as public lectures, fundraisers, exhibitions, conferences and awareness workshop, involving the participation of the public and also scientists. MareCet also believes in growing local talent and building capacity, and thus, any interested parties are most welcomed to contribute their skills, time and manpower for MareCet's efforts in marine mammal research and marine conservation.

So perhaps at this juncture, you are wondering how you can help in MareCet's efforts? One way to assist is by reporting any live sightings or stranding incidents that you encounter in Malaysia by submitting your sighting/stranding reports on their website, www.marecet.org or notifying them on their hotline, +6011-1577 6802. They have an online merchandise store which is called "The lil' MareCet Shop"; feel free to browse items on their website and support them by making a purchase. The items are designed by local designers and some are even handmade. You are unlikely to be disappointed! Last but not least, look out for volunteer opportunities where you can participate in MareCet's research and educational work and gain wonderful lifetime experiences on marine mammal research and conservation! MareCet also welcomes volunteers in the form of designers, exhibit guides, photographers, videographers, and in any other way you feel you can contribute. ☑

For more information, log on to MareCet's website, www.marecet.org, or follow them on their Facebook page, Langkawi Dolphin Research.

