



Indo-Pacific humpback dolphins

In December 2013, Jenny Cantlay spent some time on Langkawi with MareCet and the Langkawi Dolphin Research team members to collect scientific information about the dolphins and porpoises in these seas. Here is the first instalment of her experience.



Setting off from Telaga harbour

Langkawi, the jewel of Kedah, is well known for the white-bellied fish eagles soaring through its skies and the hornbills climbing through the remaining rainforest canopies.

Whilst tourists enjoy boat cruises to explore the stunning coastline, they are probably unaware that they may encounter porpoises, dolphins or even a whale on their daytrip. Yet, these marine mammals feed, breed and migrate through this area and are regularly seen by the local fishermen.

Despite their relatively common occurrence in Langkawi, there had been little investigation into the populations inhabiting these waters until 2010, when Dr Louisa Ponnampalam and her team at the University of Malaya established Langkawi Dolphin Research.

They realised that this island's seas are an important habitat for certain marine mammal species, such as Indo-Pacific finless porpoises and Indo-Pacific humpback dolphins.

Looking for Dolphins in Langkawi part 1

Between 2010 and 2011 they surveyed over 400 fishermen and nature guides to obtain information on local sightings and conservation perception. Since then, the research team has regularly traversed the island's coastline in a small boat to search for these animals and observe their behaviour.

By 2014, their aim is to have collected sufficient data that will be analysed to give a deeper understanding of the populations' ecology and lives. Ultimately

this will assist in future planning of conservation initiatives to further protect these charismatic marine animals.

I first heard about Langkawi Dolphin Research when I attended a public lecture in Selangor, given by Dr Louisa in September 2013. I was impressed by her dedication and enthusiasm to educate people about Malaysia's marine mammals in order to inspire them to care about the aquatic environment.

I asked her, "Why aren't Malaysians already aware of dolphins and porpoises living in the seas here?" She replied, "Most conservation organisations here inform people about the coral reefs and marine turtles, but none have focused on cetaceans (that is whales, dolphins and porpoises). Also, there are few published studies on these species in the Southeast Asian region and so there is less information to assist conservation efforts. Hopefully, the data collected over four years by the Langkawi Dolphin Research team will help change this situation."

"So how do you intend to encourage the public to become interested in marine mammals?" She answered, "My colleague,

Fairul, and I created the non-profit, non-governmental organisation called MareCet in 2012 to help promote public awareness about the marine environment and the mammals that swim in its seas. As well as conducting scientific research, we also engage with people through our workshops, exhibitions, lectures and activities.

"Our big plan for 2014 is to have a floating exhibition on a pontoon in Langkawi that will provide the general public with information on identification of marine mammal species, their unique biology and how we can protect them. The set-up will be innovative and interactive: with recordings of dolphin sounds; videos of their daily lives and displays of skeletons collected from dead, stranded animals, all designed to stimulate people's interest. We are very excited about this upcoming event and will publicise its launch date nearer to the time."

"As a veterinary surgeon interested in wildlife, how can I assist you?" I enquired. "Maybe you would like to join our fieldwork team in Langkawi on our next trip in December?" Excited by the opportunity to gain some valuable conservation experience, I booked my flight.

So that explains how my nautical, wildlife-watching adventures came about. On the first day at sea, I clung, like the proverbial limpet, onto the side of a speeding boat whilst clutching a datasheet and hoped that I would not embarrass myself by falling overboard. I had always thought that I was accustomed to boats, having grown up enjoying many boat rides along the Dorset coastline in the South coast of England, but that day the sizeable swell made me feel rather queasy and I regretted not having taken any sea sickness tablets. My vision of traversing calm seas was not the reality of



Cetacean spotting on a windy day



The boat on which we conducted our fieldwork



The Langkawi dolphin research team about to set off from Kuah harbour

the unexpectedly wet and windy weather conditions and it felt more like being in the UK than tropical Malaysia.

However, being British, I put on my waterproof clothing, braced my body against the rough ride and consoled myself with the thought that I would not get sunburnt! The turbulent waters also meant that trying to spot cetaceans would be more difficult as our visibility was limited. Two of the researchers, sat at the top of special high seats, would have to work hard, scanning the ocean with their binoculars looking for a dorsal fin or tail fluke emerging from the steely grey seas.

The GPS device around my neck beeped and we had arrived at the point to start our first transect line, which I marked on the sheet. We would travel a predetermined distance along the line, recording the seawater parameters, weather conditions, sea state and GPS coordinates of any human activities and marine mammals that we sighted. On encountering any dolphins or porpoise, we would carefully approach to observe their behaviour, activity, direction of movement, group composition and size, without disturbing them.

This data would be vital in providing information about the animal's abundance, distribution and habitat preferences.

The team consisted of five members: three researchers and two volunteers, including myself. Along each transect line three of us would be responsible for scanning the ocean to search for signs of cetaceans, whilst the other two would collect seawater parameter measurements and record all the data.

The first line was quite long, around eight nautical miles and took over an hour to complete. The following lines ran in parallel to this first one, along the west Langkawi coastline and provided stunning views of the shore, despite the murky weather.

Part 2 next month...

Look out in next month's magazine for the second instalment of Jenny's adventures with MareCet and if you would like to obtain further information about MareCet's conservation work, please see the following website: <http://marecet.org/> or find Langkawi Dolphin Research on Facebook.

Photos of Indo-Pacific humpback dolphins courtesy of MareCet

by Jenny Cantlay