

## DR. LOUISA SHOBHINI PONNAMPALAM: MARINE MAMMAL MALADY

### DWINDLING DUGONGS

“There are at least 27 species of marine mammals found in Malaysian waters – 26 of these are whales, dolphins or porpoises, and one species of dugong. Contrary to popular belief, most of the species most commonly found in Malaysia are from localised populations, i.e. they did not migrate from somewhere else to our waters, nor are they strays. The issues facing our marine mammals include entanglement in fishing gear, habitat degradation, decline in prey resources (due to intense fishing activities), diseases as a result of a compromised environment, and lack of protection for their core habitats. Our dugong populations are likely to be rather small and in Johor, our surveys calculate that there are only 0.04 dugongs for every km of sea searched with an average of 15 dugongs sighted in a day (a low number). Our leatherback turtles

are now functionally extinct i.e., there may still be some individuals in the wild, but they will not be able to reproduce to ensure the survival of the population – in our case, this is due to a highly skewed sex ratio (more females than males due to error in incubating the eggs – higher temperatures mean that more females are formed).”

### S.O.S (SAVE OUR SEAFOOD)

“Things aren’t looking good. Our fisheries have all crashed, yet we remain the top consumers of seafood in Southeast Asia. Seagrass meadows, which are incredibly biodiverse and have many ecological functions, are not afforded any legal provisions in Malaysia, save for areas where they happen to fall within marine parks. Also, seagrass meadows are threatened with permanent removal due to coastal development and land reclamation.”

### ENVIRONMENTALIST PROFILE

Dr. Louisa Shobhini Ponnampalam is a research fellow at the Institute of Ocean and Earth Sciences, University of Malaya and co-founder of The MareCet Research Organisation, the country's first non-profit organisation dedicated to the research and conservation of marine mammals. She currently leads two conservation based research projects: one on coastal dolphins and porpoises in Langkawi and Matang, Perak and another on dugongs in Johor. Support her at [www.marecet.org/support-marecet](http://www.marecet.org/support-marecet).



### ENVIRONMENTALIST PROFILE

Irshad Mobarak is the Managing Director of Natural History Tours and is an ecotourism consultant and conservationist based in Langkawi. To book a tour with Irshad, head over to [www.junglewalla.com](http://www.junglewalla.com) for an array of ecotourism packages for sights in Langkawi and Penang.