

HKNHS DOLPHINWATCH OUTING

SUNDAY 2 APRIL 2017



Two years and one week since our last trip out with Dolphinwatch, the NHS offered another chance to see the Chinese white dolphins in HK waters. Our small group of members and guests, including 3 children, consisted of both first-time dolphin-spotters, old and young, and those coming for second (or third) helpings of this treat. The day could not have been more different than that of two years ago: then it was a very grey morning, but this time a beautiful sunny warm day. Thanks to this, everyone was in good spirits from the outset and very positive about enjoying a day out on a boat, whether we saw dolphins or not (oh ye of little faith!)

Once aboard DW's rather luxurious and very comfortable new boat, we set off. The journey south from Tung Chung among various bits of the semi-constructed HK/Macau/Zhuhai bridge was partly spent listening to the informative talk given by our guide Vincent Poon. From Vincent we learnt that they class the dolphins' habitat in four sectors, and that the dolphins are most often seen in the West Lantau sector, ie the Tai O area, and the South West sector. Today we were heading out to the NW Lantau sector, with Lung Kwu Chau & Sha Chau Marine Park being the focus area for spotting dolphins.

Beginning with the basics, Vincent explained that the reason the dolphins had such an unusual colouring was because they lived in these murky yellow waters near the Pearl River Delta, so little or no sunlight reached them, resulting in a paler skin colour. Also, the lack of predators, since the waters were too shallow at only 8m for sharks, meant they had not had to develop camouflage.

Some people call them white dolphins, and some pink dolphins – so which is correct? Actually they are white, but they “blush” with their exertions – as we do when running for example - turning them pink. The babies are born grey, just one calf at a time, and this baby stays with

the mother for a minimum of three years. At the juvenile stage they are mottled as the grey begins to turn to pink, and measure 1 to 1.5m. As they grow to adulthood, from 6 to 9 years, they reach 2 to 2.5m. At 10 years old, the dolphins are mature enough to breed. Although elsewhere their maximum life span is 40 years, in HK waters it is only 20, so reproduction levels are low.

Turning to the problems faced by our HK dolphins, Vincent told us that approximately 15 died last year, and half of those found dead were calves. Necropsies found that milk inside both calves and female adults contained highly toxic chemicals, including organo-chlorines, especially DDT and PCBs and heavy metals like mercury. Thus poisoning from the polluted waters in which they live is thought to be the major threat to the dolphins.

Members were shocked and surprised at this, as many had assumed the extensive construction linked with the HK/Zhuhai bridge to have had a direct link with dolphin deaths. Plus, the reclamation for the third airport runway is situated between two of the dolphins' habitat sectors, causing them to move southwards and westwards, away from HK. Certainly, there is still danger from the very heavy traffic in these waters: up to 50 high speed ferries per hour! not to mention the attendant noise. Vincent showed us an appalling photograph of a dolphin with a perfectly-recognisable propeller-shaped wound, which it did not survive for long.



Despite these ravages though, the dolphins do survive. According to Dr Sam Hung, the current head- (should that be tail?) count stands at 60/61, much the same as a couple of years ago. Nearby in the Pearl River Estuary, there are estimated to be almost 400, and in South China waters overall, almost 1000. In response to the question "What can be done to help them?" and one member specifically asked whether Ocean Park was doing anything, Vincent replied that Ocean Park was involved only to the extent of carrying out the necropsies, but there were no plans to keep or breed the dolphins in captivity, an argument supported by DW researcher Dr Lindsay Porter. A maximum speed of 10 knots has been introduced for vessels passing through the Lung Kwu Chau and Brothers Island Marine Parks (MP), and a SW Lantau MP is being established.

However, this piecemeal approach which does not cover the entire shoreline where pink dolphins occur has obvious and serious drawbacks.

So, our interesting and informative lesson over, we got down to the serious task of searching the waters for something dolphin-shaped. Those breakers are such a tease! But having taken us to a likely spot, it wasn't too long before our eagle-eyed boat captain was pointing and calling Vincent's attention. And sure enough, we saw dolphins! Three adults gave us brief but rewarding and multiple sightings over the next hour or so. Everyone was thrilled – from the under 7s to the over 70s! Vincent had told us that for many years now one could typically only hope to see 2 or 3 dolphins. I was still bragging about the 10 we had seen on the last NHS outing in 2015, and assuring him it would be better today, when time began to run out and there was mention of



heading homeward. Just as I began to feel slightly sheepish, and (irrationally) disappointed, there was a shout “dolphins at the back of the boat!” And indeed, there was an additional adult and a 6 year old sub-adult, both of whom were recognized by Vincent as numbers 22 and 23, the latter (the sub-adult) named Shark Teeth! So with a total of five, we did it again, and beat the average!

With the surprising and unfortunately low turnout from Members for this outing, the day was a big financial loss, but who's measuring in \$? It was a huge success for everyone present, so a big thank you to those who did support us, and to Vincent and DolphinWatch for their good work.



Report by Jan Campbell / Photos by Julie Moffat