

REPORT ON DINNER TALK BY DR LINDSAY PORTER - 14 OCTOBER 2014

“Pearl River dolphins and how development of Hong Kong and its surroundings impact their ecology and habitat”

How fortunate were the 24 members who attended this fascinating dinner talk held upstairs at Delaney’s? I very nearly didn’t attend for the usual reasons: it’s mid week, I’ll be too tired, get home too late etc!!! but was **so** pleased I made the effort.



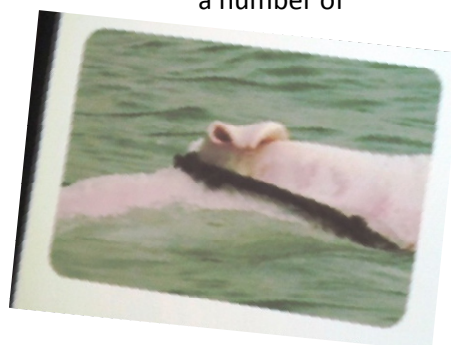
Dr Lindsay Porter was our guest speaker. She is Senior Research Scientist for the Asia Pacific marine mammal research programme of the University of St. Andrews. Her special interest is how man and his activities impacts on tropical marine mammals.

This talk wasn’t just about the ‘pink’ dolphins. Dr Porter talked initially about one of her favourite sea animals, namely the dugong, which was and still is considered a powerful aphrodisiac. Could this be because early seafarers with salt encrusted eyesight mistook them for mermaids? Evidently, in Thailand, dugong tears are a powerful love potion and eating dugong meat is believed to attract the opposite sex.

Dr Porter then explained that Hong Kong has a rich history of marine animals. In fact, the waters around Hong Kong have been a stomping ground for up to 36 recorded species. She mentioned in particular the Pigmy Sperm and Amorous Whales as well as the Bottle-nosed, Rough Toothed, Spotted and Chinese White Dolphins. The Bottle-nosed Dolphins are the same species as those kept in Ocean Park. Sadly, the status of the Chinese White Dolphin aka Pink Dolphin (Scientific name: *sousa chinensis*) is now considered endangered rather than near threatened. Dr Porter also showed us photos of the Finless Porpoise, which can be seen around Tai O and are in greater numbers than the Chinese White Dolphin. These can be seen easily from the coastal hiking trails from Tai O to Fan Lau on Lantau Island at this time of the year, apparently.

Dr Porter’s talk then focused on the Chinese White Dolphin, which is so vulnerable by virtue of its close proximity to man and his activities. She listed a number of threats to their survival. These were:

- shipping – especially high speed ferries that produce such loud engine noise,
- fishing boats,
- rubbish from fishing activities and in particular fishing lines,
- water pollution which causes skin diseases, and
- habitat loss



Aside from the airport reclamation problems, the building of the Hong Kong to Zhuhai (Macau) Bridge is causing great concern for the dolphins’ safety. Currently, there is 24/7 monitoring of the noise and vibrations generated by the bridge construction because, as Dr Porter stressed, “it’s all about sound for the dolphins”. Since dolphins communicate by making specific sounds, they are directly affected and distressed by excessive construction noise. However, it was reassuring to know the Hong Kong government was fully on board and supportive of the monitoring program.

All is not doom and gloom for the Chinese showed us



White Dolphin though as Dr Porter recent photos (taken the previous day in fact) of young dolphins at play in the area. She also mentioned that while it was yet to be officially confirmed, there could be a large population of these dolphins in the Pearl River Estuary. It is encouraging that dolphins do seem to return to waters after construction is completed, as in the case of the airport, and hopefully this will be so with the new bridge. Dr Porter was also

hopeful that those dolphins that survived the bridge construction might in fact benefit from the pylons because fish seeking shelter could be attracted to the pylons and therefore provide the dolphins with a more accessible food supply. The bridge pylons may also provide a haven for the dolphins protecting them from large ships and high speed ferries.

It was truly a fascinating talk. Not only did Dr Porter provide wonderful relevant and recent photos, she also spoke in a way that was entertaining yet conveyed the importance of the excellent work she and her team of researchers are undertaking to ensure the safety of marine animals in Hong Kong waters.



Thanks to Rose for arranging such an excellent speaker. By the way, when you next come across a Tin Hau temple, look carefully at the long pieces of 'wood' that might be inside. Some of them may be rib bones from a Baleen Whale!

Report by Sue Shaw



Dr Porter was presented with a copy of the latest HKNHS Memoir