

## **Update on the injured Chinese White Dolphin off SW Lantau**

*Reported on 20 January 2015*

Dear All,

This is a follow up and update on the severely injured Chinese White Dolphin off the southwest coast of Lantau.

I was disappointed to see that none of the newspapers contacted were interested in using the information and assessment provided. Have they chosen to use it, perhaps it could have made for a more balanced reporting. At present, however, as the dispute over this tragic case is heating up, I feel obligated to provide further thoughts and comments.

Since the day the injured dolphin was first seen (late Friday afternoon, the 16 Jan), my HKU-based research team has been conducting daily monitoring of the injured animal's overall status, conditions and behaviour. It was not done by sitting out there and observing the animal the whole day long, but by following a standard field protocol of behavioural data collection, assessing the animal overall activities, movement, dive pattern, and taking a telephoto close-up photographs of the wounds. This facilitated a comparative day-to-day assessment of the animal's conditions.

This morning, Tuesday the 20th, shortly after 9 AM (prior to the arrival of any other observers, such as the HK Dolph. Conserv. Soc. and Ocean Park team), we saw the injured dolphin near shore and very close to a small fishing boat (a local boat that uses small seine nets to catch small fish). At times, the dolphin was approaching the boat as close as 1 m and was trying to capture the fish discarded by the fisherman. This is a behaviour we seldom observe in Hong Kong. We have seen dolphins foraging behind trawlers, catching fish that either escaped the trawler's net or were discarded by fisherman. A scene as observed this morning is highly unusual. Basically, the animal was bagging for food.

This observation on its own indicates that the animal is hungry and resorts to overcoming its natural fear of humans and boats in hope of getting whatever little food it can. Evidently, and contrary to what Dr. Samuel Hung of HK Dolphin Conservation Soc. says, the dolphin is not able to capture sufficient amount of food on its own.

Furthermore, we have seen the animal logging, and it was done several times during the observation period. The term "logging" refers to behaviour when the animal stays motionless at the surface, which is generally done when the animal needs to rest to recover its energy. We very seldom see "logging" in Chinese White Dolphins; almost never in fact. This morning, the injured dolphin was logging almost continuously, on and off, several times during the 10-min period of collecting behavioural data. This indicates that the dolphin is getting increasingly weak.

Our photographic data (telephoto close-up photographs of the injuries) shows that the tissue is increasingly necrotic. It looks very bad. A substantial amount of tissue in the injured areas is already severely rotten and the conditions are visibly worsening day by day (my research team has telephoto close-ups of the wounds since the first sighting last week).

There are several other details that we have collected over the past days; the above lists the most obvious evidence that clearly indicates the dolphin has hardly any chance to make it if not given a direct medical attention. I estimate that if not helped, the animal will likely die within a couple of weeks at the most, and it will be a very painful death.

Earlier today I was asked the following question:

"Hong Kong Dolphin Conservation Society argued that, the dolphin may get hurt in rescue action and suggests the dolphin should stay in ocean. What is your comment on Hong Kong Dolphin Conservation Society's suggestion? Is it possible to take rescue action?"

The only logical reply can be as follows:

If something goes wrong during the rescue operation then yes, it could hurt the animal. Mishaps can never be rule-out. However, if performed well and in a professional manner, a rescue operation can be successful and not cause any more harm than what the animal has already experienced. It is a similar situation as treating a victim of a serious traffic accident; if something during the surgery goes wrong, the injured person may die. Mishaps can never be rule-out. But if not taken to a hospital and put right away on a surgical table, the victim has no chance and will for sure die. If asked, what do you think the victim's family would opt to do?

At present, the important point is that the dolphin is suffering a tremendous human-caused injury. The animal is undoubtedly in an unspeakable pain. The only humane course of action is to take responsibility for what other human caused. Leaving the injured dolphin in the ocean, as suggested by HK Dolphin Conservation Soc., equals abandoning it at the time when it needs our help most. This would be a terribly inhumane thing to do.

Considering the comments given by HK Dolphin Conservation Soc., I am sorry to say that in my opinion Dr. Hung's assessment is severely misdiagnosed. Leaving the animal unattended is equal to sentencing it for a long and painful death.

I am aware of the rescue action attempted by the AFCD and Ocean Park team this morning. In fact, two members of my research team were present at the scene as independent observers. We also suggested that if the rescue is to take place, it should use the best boatman in the area; hence we recommended to OPC/AFCD that they hire the boat and skipper that my research team have worked with for the past 5 years. He is undoubtedly the most skilled, considered, and dolphin-cautions seaman out there.

The two members of my research team have witnessed the entire operation from the onset to its unsuccessful conclusion, and can confirm that all have been done in accordance to the best international practice. The action was well coordinated, professional, and cautious. The dolphin could not be approached close enough to be caught; which in itself indicates that the approach taken by the rescue team was very conservative and careful. Although the dolphin is obviously under a tremendous injury-caused stress, it did not display any additional stress or avoidance response that could have been due to the approach by the rescue team. It is just a pity that the attempt was unsuccessful.

For your further info, I attach here some photographs taken this morning, along with two photos taken last Sunday (the photos are labelled with date), which can give you an indication of the progressing deterioration of the injuries. Sad to say, the infection is already there and it will get only worse if not treated soon.

I am also attaching my previous account of this case, sent you last Sunday. Feel free to use it, if you decide to broaden the information given in your reports.

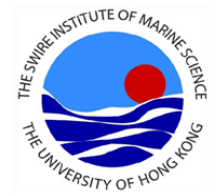
Regards,

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*Photo credit:* Cetacean Ecology Lab, The Swire Institute of Marine Science, HKU