

The sad case of critically injured Chinese White Dolphin: A case of failed social responsibility

Letter to the Editor

2 February 2015

This past Friday, 30 Jan 2015, marks the end of the 2nd week since a Chinese White Dolphin, a young male recently named 'Hope', was seen severely injured by a boat's propeller off the coast of SW Lantau. Our research team from the Cetacean Ecology Lab at The Swire Institute of Marine Science, HKU, once again performed a close visual assessment of the animal, and the first thing we noted when approaching the injured dolphin was the evident severe deterioration in its overall physical condition. 'Hope' has lost a lot of weight since our previous sighting on Monday the 26th January. The under-skin layer of fat, called blubber, that is crucial in retaining dolphins' overall physiological functions, has substantially thinned. His neck is now visibly narrowed and one can easily discern the cranium (the part of skull that holds the brain) from the rest of the body. This is not how healthy dolphin looks and is indicative of advanced starvation.

While Hope's body tries to fight off infection and cope with its severe injuries, its nutritional demands are obviously greater than under normal circumstances. However, his movement is seriously impaired by the severe injuries and so its nutritional intake is evidently compromised. Putting it in simple terms, the animal is starving, and this only hardens its overall struggle for survival.



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

Hope photographed off SW Lantau on 30-Jan-2015

Later that afternoon we learned that the injured dolphin is seen almost daily in close proximity of Tai O Bay, where he appears very early in the morning and approaches local small fishing boats. We have learned that several local fishermen share with the injured dolphin a portion of their daily catch. This is a very touching gesture, and it is probably in part thanks to this provisioning by local fisherman that the dolphin has not yet starved to death.

This past Friday, our photographic close-up inspection of the wounds gave very worrisome diagnosis. The large cut at the base of the fluke has widened by some 1-2 inches and the backbone of the animal is now exposed. The tissue around this area is necrotic and decomposing. Elsewhere on Hope's body, the previously healthy skin is now covered with numerous lesions, indicating that its immune system is now substantially weakened.



Continuous deterioration of the wound at the base of the fluke in the past two weeks



Increasing number of skin lesions on Hope's head



Various skin disorders begun to spread on Hope's body, indicating that its immune system has substantially weakened

At present, there is probably still enough blood supply to the fluke that it has not yet turned completely necrotic, but this condition will only deteriorate further if left unattended. There is no doubt that the fluke will eventually necrotize and if so, it will simply fall off. This is what happens to marine mammal victims of boat strikes, leading to a long and unspeakably painful death.

Over two weeks have passed since Hope was first seen off the Tai O Peninsula and what we have witnessed in these past two weeks is nothing but an acute case of animal welfare that went terribly wrong. First, our call for a swift rescue operation fell on a deaf ear. Several boats were dispatched on Friday the 16th January, but as the night approached the operation had to be, understandably, discontinued. The next day, however, local authorities were not ready to provide any further assistance. The same day, local dolphin-watch operators in Tai O were accused for inflicting the injury; a completely unfounded claim based on no evidence whatsoever. A major internet-based hysteria campaign was stirred up which prevented a rational assessment and a prompt response. Emotions and gross misjudgement of Hope's conditions by an apparent 'expert' hampered any further progress for what is now over two weeks of the animal's unspeakable pain and suffer. Two weeks of inertia by local authorities. Two long weeks of potentially fatal procrastination...

These two long weeks were tainted with a major misunderstanding of some very basic concepts; the issue of animal welfare was confused with animal conservation and the appropriate response needed to help this injured dolphin was completely derailed. This sad case had never anything to do with conservation *per se*; it was not about the removal of a free-ranging dolphin from its natural environment; but it had all to do with helping a suffering animal injured by us human, a living creature with feelings, emotions, and the pain of suffering similar to that of our owns. As I look back at how the events unfolded over the past two weeks, one other aspect becomes increasingly apparent: during these two long weeks the case of the suffering animal became something of far wider dimensions; it became a matter of broader public understanding and social responsibility, or perhaps lack of it. It is a moral case where we as a civilised society, we the citizens of Hong Kong, failed.

Few of us would think twice if we came across an injured dog or cat lying on the street; we would pick the creature up and take it to a vet or call the SPCA. Hardly anyone with humane feelings would think twice before doing so. If a truck would hit one of the feral cattle on Lantau, we would not leave the animal unattended and let it suffer for days. We would call a specialised service to help, even if the help would have to end with euthanasia. That would be the only humanely responsible thing to do. That's what people that care for other living beings feel compelled to do. Why then do the wild dolphins of Hong Kong, the very animals seen as local biodiversity icon, are being treated differently? Don't they deserve at the very least a similar humane treatment?

We have in Hong Kong self-proclaimed 'crusaders' that pledge to dedicate their lives to save the Hong Kong dolphin population. We hear frequently that their love of these animals is boundless. This love seems indeed boundless at times and reaches levels that compromise what should matter most -- logic and rational thinking. This is, as the saying goes, love to death; and as we have witnessed in the past two weeks, it can be literally so.

Clearly, there is a need for a proper marine mammal rescue protocol to be developed in Hong Kong, given rigorous professional review and once approved it should be adopted and obeyed by all concerned parties. There must be ways for human-animal coexistence in the coastal waters of Hong Kong, and there is plenty of space for everyone to meaningfully contribute while striving to achieve the common goal. In doing so, however, logical rational thinking has to take the lead. In Hope's case, the position of the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society can serve for an excellent example. Although fundamentally against captivities, it quickly noted the specific conditions and recognised the urgency of the matter. There was no ideological agenda or personal beliefs put on display, but rational thinking was applied in the context of the fast unfolding events. There was no time for deliberation; there was a need for action based on logic and realistic assessment of the circumstances at the time. I can only wish that all other players can soon follow the example of the Sea Shepherd Society and put the rational thinking before their personal agenda or institutional bureaucratic constraints. There is still hope, I hope...

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