

CONSERVATION IS NOT ALL GLOOM AND DOOM. IN THIS, THE YEAR OF THE DOLPHIN, EDITOR MALCOLM TAIT MEETS **RUBAIYAT MANSUR MOWGLI**, A DOLPHIN CONSERVATIONIST WITH AN AMAZING TALE TO TELL



THE Beauty OF Bangladesh

We read so often about disappearing populations of whales and dolphins, that when news comes through of the exact opposite, it comes as something of a shock. A pleasant shock, but a shock nonetheless. In February 2004, in a Bangladeshi delta romantically named the Swatch-of-no-Ground, dolphin researchers, funded by WDCS and others, came across a previously unknown population of bottlenose dolphins. Had they only just arrived, or had we discovered a brand new group of animals?

Legendary animals

Rubaiyat Mansur Mowgli leads the team that's now studying the pods. 'There is no reason to assume that these charismatic animals have only recently moved into the area,' he says. 'The fishermen that work in the nearby fishing grounds confirm the presence of bottlenose dolphins year round. In fact the animals are part of their legend: they've told us amazing stories about dolphins protecting and saving men lost at sea.'

Mowgli's enthusiasm for these stories, and the animals that spawned them, is palpable. He loves these bottlenose dolphins, and indeed the many other species that live in this delta that's formed by the Ganges, Meghna and Brahmaputra rivers, and where strong up-currents drive nutrients to the surface providing an ideal habitat for all sorts of marine fauna.

'For several years we have been observing and recording Ganges River dolphins and Irrawaddy dolphins in Sundarban and the adjoining

waterways,' he says. 'Their cryptic surfacing patterns in these dense, dark waters, however, allow only brief glimpses. So our first encounter with oceanic dolphins in crystal-clear water, in a survey funded by WDCS and others, was a life-altering experience for us.'

For the dolphins, too. Since their discovery, Mowgli has been running a study of their population. He aims to build on that by examining the role of fisheries in the area and how they interact with the dolphins'

lives. The long-term plan is to use this information to build a conservation management plan for whales and dolphins in Bangladesh.

Amazing numbers

But this first stage is about the monitoring, and for his initial field session, completed last year, he enlisted the crew of the boat that took him into the Swatch, from captain to cook, to help him spot the dolphins. There were plenty to count. Over 100 bottlenose groups were recorded, each with an average population of 25 (although some may have been repeat sightings), and eight spinner dolphin groups, each averaging 80 individuals. Fin whales, Bryde's whales and 30 Indo-Pacific humpback dolphins were also ticked off. Thanks to an unusually high occurrence





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of fin nicks and markings, possibly from clashes with local gill nets, the dolphins are relatively easy to identify, 357 separate individuals logged to date.

Would more animals reveal themselves with more researchers? The second field trip, completed in February, came up with the answer – a resounding yes. Enlisting help from a variety of volunteers, including his wife, and spending 36 days at sea in total, Mowgli's bottlenose group sightings rose to an incredible 174, while no fewer than 66 large whales were spotted, and pan-tropical spotted dolphins made a first appearance, too. Mowgli is now getting to work on analysing the 70,000 photos they took of the animals' dorsal fins.

With so much whale and dolphin activity going on in the Swatch, it seems amazing that, the fishermen apart, no one knew about them. But then, marine conservation in Bangladesh is new. 'When we talk to people about the whales and dolphins present in our waters, most have a difficult time believing us,' says Mowgli. 'There is a lot of work to be done in the field of environmental education. Even the fact that the Shushuk (Ganges River dolphin) is a dolphin is not widely understood.'

This is why Mowgli's project is two-pronged. There's the gaining of knowledge of the animals themselves in the Swatch, and the conservation

measures that will then follow, but there's also the all-important aspect of broadening the understanding of whale and dolphin needs in Bangladesh that Mowgli wants to tackle.

'I guess the fact that so little is known about these animals in our waters played a big role for me in deciding to undertake this project,' he says. 'Most people in Bangladesh live in rural areas and are still very much connected to nature and aware of the increasing threats to our environment, and I'm discovering that they now want to know more about the whales and dolphins, too. We are sharing the findings from our research with the general public through newspaper articles, a documentary film, and illustrated children's books as well as other educational materials, widely distributed.'

Interest in marine wildlife

Originally a wildlife photographer and guide in Bangladesh's Sundarban mangrove forest, Mowgli is noticing a steady shift of interest from terrestrial animals (such as the tiger, about which he has made films for National Geographic and the BBC), to aquatic ones in recent years. 'Since we started working with dolphins, the Ministry of Environment and Forest has been helpful and accommodating.'

Perhaps it realises the extraordinary opportunities for eco-tourism. Think of this: you can get on a ship close to Dhaka and cruise down through Ganges River dolphin habitat to the Sundarban forest. Then in the lower Sundarbans and the coastal waters of Bangladesh, you have the chance to see the finless porpoise and the Indo-Pacific humpbacked dolphin along with probably the largest population in the world of Irrawaddy dolphins. Then, 40km offshore from the Sundarban is the Swatch-of-No-Ground, the playground of bottlenose, spinner and spotted dolphins and at least two species of baleen whales.

This region of Bangladesh is a hotspot for cetacean abundance and diversity, and Mowgli intends to keep it that way. 'There are seedlings of conservation awareness in more and more people every day,' he smiles. 'My brother's daughter is four, and has already gone twice

with me to sea and seen dolphins and whales. I take it as my personal responsibility to look after the wellbeing of these animals until she and other children can take over.

'Thanks to WDCS we have been able to explore the fascinating diversity. Now we must share this discovery and fascination with the world!'

WHAT FRIENDS ARE FOR
Mowgli and his spotting team (top) and the bottlenose dolphins that are among the species they've discovered.

THIS PARTICULAR PART OF BANGLADESH IS A HOTSPOT FOR WHALE AND DOLPHIN ABUNDANCE AND DIVERSITY OF SPECIES