

***Southern-Central Mediterranean Cetacean & Marine Conservation Research
finds long-term collaborative assistance in the AFM***

*Conservation Biology Research Group,
Department of Biology
University of Malta*

Introduction

In 2013, the Cetacean & Marine Conservation Research project around the Maltese Islands celebrates its 18th year of ongoing work. With the goal of obtaining detailed baseline data on cetacean and other marine species found in the Southern Central Mediterranean, this project, run by Dr. Adriana Vella, Ph.D at the Conservation Biology Research Group (CBRG) at the University of Malta (UoM) has managed to develop cetacean science and awareness for conservation in this region: A mission considered near to impossible by many due to the difficulty of studying these elusive creatures. Valuable cooperation came from the Armed Forces of Malta (AFM) who joined in the effort by forwarding any sightings out at sea through these years. A tangible example of the goodwill of AFM commanders that realised the importance of such ongoing marine conservation research effort.

Through the years the AFM has also increasingly been involved in the salvage of turtles, dolphins, whales or other organisms needing assistance out at sea and Dr. A. Vella has often been contacted in such cases to collaborate in these circumstances. She has frequently also assisted in collecting the injured turtle from the AFM, taking records of it and transporting it to the rehabilitation centre.

Research for better understanding and accurate awareness of the needs of our marine life.

Working on islands surrounded by extensive human pressures and impacts poses many challenges toward the study and conservation of the elusive dolphins and whales in the region: Cetacean populations that have had to deal and learn to survive in extensive vessel traffic, noise, pollution and over-fishing. But can such populations, some of which already endangered, continue to survive as these pressures increase? Awareness must develop hand in hand with accurate knowledge of the

species in need of conservation according to both international and national laws.

Apart from guiding effective conservation management in the 25nm around the Maltese Islands, selecting potential marine conservation areas for large ranging species needs to be based on the best available data. Data on marine species and their populations obtained through the dedicated efforts of Dr. A. Vella, conservation biologist, allows analyses of the data for better knowledge and future implementation of best local conservation strategies.

Through such ongoing scientific and dedicated cetacean research it have been possible to record and report 1st scientific evidence of Fin Whales (*Balaenoptera physalus*) in coastal waters of the Maltese Islands, apart from further offshore. This ongoing effort also includes research and monitoring of the Common dolphins (*Delphinus delphis*) (Endangered in the Mediterranean, IUCN) as well as, the Bottlenose (*Tursiops truncatus*), Striped (*Stenella coeruleoalba*), Risso's (*Grampus griseus*) dolphin species and Sperm whales (*Physeter macrocephalus*). Respective distributions, abundance and population measures have been at the heart of this local field research, that have utilised both aerial and marine scientific surveys for the past 18 years. The data is being used to produce detailed population profiles for each species and its conservation status in Maltese waters.

Rapidly changing seas pose problems to cetaceans and other marine species

Cetacean survival is affected by marine biodiversity changes due to over-exploitation, habitat degradation and climate change. Given that the rate of change of these effects and that many cetacean species and their populations are not monitored adequately everywhere in the Mediterranean, Dr. A. Vella believes that conservation action plans should include support for monitoring and management. Locally through the long-term efforts, not only have we managed to gather detailed data on cetaceans, but while doing so, we have gathered data on marine turtles, sea birds, sharks, rays, fish and gelatinous organisms (such as jellyfish) to form one of the very few holistic and long-term research programmes on marine biodiversity in this central part of the Mediterranean. This demanding effort which involves both field and laboratory work, has found kind long-term partnerships, such as, the AFM and local sea-users. The Transport Malta Authority issues regular Notices to Mariners to allow sea-users to forward details of their observations out at sea to Dr. Adriana Vella at adriana.vella@um.edu.mt or by contacting her by phoning the mobile no: 99429592.

Awareness through educational productions with AFM's assistance

Photos from research have been used for photo ID dolphin work, as well as, increase local awareness. A very popular example is the roving photographic exhibition of dolphins in Maltese waters, launched in 2001, that allows locals and tourists to appreciate these splendid and important species constituting part of our marine biodiversity through these images. In particular Common dolphins and Bottlenose dolphins feature in this exhibition. Both formal and informal education is never enough toward allowing the public to learn and understand the wonders that lie under that blue blanket we call the sea, with its underestimated complexity and vulnerability.

Years of dedicated cetacean field work, has also allowed the production of various original local documentaries to highlight the beauty, services, and needs of our seas and it has focused on species most difficult to relate to in every day life, due to their being “out of sight”. Dr. A. Vella has dedicated voluntary time to local awareness through working with volunteers of the Biological Conservation Research Foundation (BICREF, NGO) founded in 1998. Among the various voluntary projects, Dr. Vella has contributed extensively to BICREF documentaries' productions. Cetaceans and other marine life feature eminently in the latest BICREF documentary production called “*Waves of Life*”, that gently carries the viewer through the meaning and value of the diversity of life around us to the majestic beauty and survival requirements of cetaceans found in the central Mediterranean.

The AFM also assisted in this local awareness effort through the support of a helicopter and pilot for filming the breath-taking beautiful scenes of the Maltese coasts. AFM aerial footage was used in both the latest *Waves of Life*, an International Award Winning Documentary and the *BICREF EcoMalta* documentaries produced in 2002, Award for best NGO project for The International Ecotourism Year. In both these unique productions Dr. A. Vella found the full support of the AFM, which was rightfully acknowledged for its enthusiastic assistance.

Looking ahead and sustaining AFM collaboration in marine conservation efforts.

In its enthusiastic and long-term contributions, the AFM has proved to be a worthy collaborator in these CBRG-UoM wide-reaching marine conservation research projects. It is not surprising that this long-standing cooperation has been recently renewed through an agreement of collaboration between the University of Malta and the AFM.