Facultative river dolphins: conservation and social ecology of freshwater and coastal Irrawaddy dolphins in Indonesia
Kreb, D.
This research began with a simple telephone call from Indonesia to Scotland, where at that time I was assisting a radio-tracking study on wildcats, by my good friend and colleague Vincent Nijman who asked me if I knew that there were river dolphins in the Mahakam River in East Kalimantan (for which tip I owe him). Since I so far had only heard about the obligate river dolphins in the Amazon, Ganges, Indus and Yangtze Rivers, which had already captured my interest and imagination, I was surprised and interested to find out more about it. From the sides of the Provincial Wildlife Conservation Department of East Kalimantan (BKSDA Kaltim) and WWF Indonesia (thanks to former staff member Ron Lilley), there was an interest to conduct a preliminary survey in the freshwater dolphins in the Mahakam, which were locally referred to as the pesut. Thanks to the help of Dr Peter J.H. van Bree, Curator Emeritus of the Zoological Museum of Amsterdam, who helped me prepare a proposal to join the survey and find a sponsor through Marc Argeloo and Jikkie Jonkman from WNF Nederland, I soon flew off on my way to meet my first river dolphin in real. I should say that my first observation of the dolphins thrilled me with admiration and I felt that this survey was not to be my last one especially after the numbers we encountered during the survey were rather low and visible threats were numerous.

The research really had to be started from the scratch as no previous systematic studies on Irrawaddy dolphins in East Kalimantan had been done upon which to build. The difficulties in studying cetaceans in general is that it requires a great deal of organisation and preparation in order to work as efficiently as possible because of the use of boats, which sometimes is an unpredictable and costly factor. Some creativity and patience was required at times when the working schedule needed to be adjusted when dealing with engine problems or during bad weather conditions, especially at sea where lack of freshwater also was problematic at times. During this research I have not only learned a lot about dolphins, boats, rivers and seas, but also about local human cultures, of which I found the mutual respect and hospitality that I encountered heart warming. My impressions, which turned out to be realistic based on interviews, were that many fishermen in the Mahakam actually had an appreciation for the dolphins and did not wish the dolphins to disappear from the river. This encouraged me in my attempts to set up a conservation program. A range of activities focusing on increasing local awareness of the younger generation, fishermen, politics
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and society in general, have been conducted since late 2000 until now by the local NGO Yayasan Konservasi RASI (Conservation Foundation for Rare Aquatic Species of Indonesia).

I am most grateful to my promoter Professor Frederick R. Schram for taking this project on his shoulders and for his enduring support and scientific guidance. All my manuscripts have been commented and corrected by him. In this regard, a special note of thanks should go to Dr. Arne Mooers, who brought Fred and me together. I also owe a great deal of gratitude to Dr Peter J.H. van Bree, who helped me throughout the study with literature, good advice, and assistance with locating other support. I also thank Dr Jan Wattel for his help in finding financial support. Harm van der Geest is also thanked for his good tip. My special thanks go to my first counterpart Ir Ade M. Rachmat (M.Sc), former head of the BKSDA Kaltim, who has so unfortunately deceased some months ago. He invited me as a guest to participate in the first preliminary survey, covered all costs and had me stay in his house in Samarinda in between the surveys. My next counterparts Ir Padmo Wiyoso, former head of BKSDA Kaltim and Prof A. Arrifien Bratawinata of the University of Mulawarman in Samarinda (UNMUL) are also thanked for their support of the study.

I would like to thank the Indonesian Institute for Sciences (LIPI), the Provincial Wildlife Conservation Department (BKSDA Kaltim) and local governments of Central- (KUKER) and West Kutai (KUBAR) for granting permission to conduct field research. At the Division of Inter-Institutional Cooperation of LIPI, Ibu Ina Syarief and Ibu Krisbiwatti have been very helpful in arranging necessary permits and letters and are thanked for this. I thank all my field assistants gratefully: Hardy, Syafrudin, Chaironi, Zainudin, Syoim, Rudiansyah, Bambang, Sonaji, Marzuki, Iwiet, Munadianto, Hendra, Deni, Ramon, Audrie and particularly Ahank, Arman, Budiono, Yusri, Karen and Syachrani, who assisted during most surveys and with full dedication. The boatsmen Pak Sairapi, Pak Muis, Pak Mahyuni, Pak Iwan, Pak Johan, Pak Kasino and Pak Anto are thanked gratefully. I also enjoyed the company of Djupri, Fleur Butcher and Pak Sega during the first preliminary survey in 1997.

Funding for fieldwork was provided by Ocean Park Conservation Foundation, Hong Kong; Martina de Beukelaar Stichting; Stichting J.C. van der Hucht Fonds; Gibbon Foundation; Netherlands Ministry of Agriculture, Nature Management and Fisheries (PIN/ KNIP); Van Tienhoven Stichting; World Wildlife Fund for Nature (Netherlands); Stichting Doctor Catharina van Tussenbroek Fonds, Coastal Resource
Management Program/Proyek Pesisir and Amsterdamse Universiteits Vereniging. Funds for printing costs were provided by the Jurriaanse Stichting and the Institute for Biodiversity and Ecosystem Dynamics. All sponsors mentioned are acknowledged gratefully.

During workshops and congresses it has been very pleasant to meet with a number of cetacean colleagues of which some have been particularly helpful during the research; First of all I owe a great deal of gratitude to Thomas A. Jefferson, who allowed me to assist in his research on Indo-Pacific humpback dolphins in Hong Kong for 2 months in 1998; he taught me many useful survey techniques and has always been helpful in all my research questions and requests for literature. I also thank the “Ocean Park crew” for their support, interest in my project and their good company. Randall Reeves, William Perrin, Bernd Würsig, Brian Smith, Fabrizio Borsani, Tony Martin, Jeanette Thomas, Tamara Mcguire, Ian Baird, Randall Wells, Vincent Nijman, Miquel Vences, Isabel Beasley, Guido Parra, Chris Smeenk, Martjan Lammertink, Gabriella Fredriksson, Willie Smits, Arne Mooers, Kees Hazevoet, Martin Genner, Resit Sözer, Matthijs Couwelaar, Bert Hoeksema and Annelies Pierrot-Bults are thanked for sending me literature, exchanging ideas, reviewing my manuscripts, and their general support. I also thank my colleagues at the Zoological Museum, in particular Tineke Prins, Martjan Lammertink, Vincent Nijman, Mansour Aliabadi, Miquel Vences, Kees Roselaar, Tonnie Dunselman, Andre Walgreen, Adri Rol, Mohamed El Moussaoui, Wouter Kraandijk, Thomas van Wissen, Hans van Brandwijk, Tatjana Das, Wouter Los and colleagues at ETI for providing a pleasant working environment and support. I am grateful to all librarians of the Plantage Library and the Zoological Museum for use of their facilities. I owe a great deal to Fabrizio Borsani for providing me with a good hydrophone to make acoustic recordings. Kelly Robertson is thanked for analysing genetic skin samples of the pesut (this study is still in progress). All the co-authors in manuscripts of this thesis are thanked for their cooperation.

I would like to thank my husband Budiono and Gustinah for translation of the summary and all chapter abstracts in Bahasa Indonesian. Tineke Prins and Kees Hazevoet are acknowledged for correcting the Dutch summary and Jan van Arkel for preparing the cover design and some figures for this thesis. I also thank Hari Moelyono for his nice pen-drawings of the pesut and for handling the main editing process of the small Video CD on the pesut and its conservation. I thank Syachrani and Erwin van Faassen for solving all my computer problems and program installations.
Paulien de Bruijn is thanked for providing a Dutch breeze for a while during my long stay in Indonesia. I also thank her and Linda Zwiggelaar for their help as paranymphs. My daughter was born when I was still in the middle of my analysis and thanks to Gaguk and the Titaantjes, especially Martine, Melanie, and Alette, who took over a great deal of her daily care, I was able to continue my analysis both in Indonesia and in the Netherlands.

I am also especially grateful for the participation of Prof. dr. W. Admiraal, Prof. dr. P.H. van Tienderen, Prof. dr. S.B.J. Menken, Prof. dr. H.H.T. Prins, Prof. dr. J.F. Borsani, and Dr. C. Smeenk in the Doctorate Commission.

I would like to express my gratitude to all fishermen and residents mostly along the Mahakam River, Balikpapan Bay and Berau Islands who participated in interviews or provided us with information on the pesut and/or cetacean species or on fisheries. I am also grateful for the hospitality with which our team was always received in every village to which we came. I thank my foster family of Pak Usman in Long Bagun, the family of Pak Mahyuni in Data Bilang, the family of nenek and Masman, the family of Nina losmen in Muara Pahu, and the family of Pak Yan in Muara Kaman for their true friendship.

Naturally, I would like to thank my best friends and family, especially Joleen, Linda, and my sisters Conny and Monique in the Netherlands and family in Indonesia, who have been very encouraging to me to pursue my scientific research, but in whose company I could also relax and have fun and enjoy the other non-scientific side of life. I thank Ronald for his encouragements and for sharing mountain walks through which I developed determination and which set off my exploration of fauna and flora. I am very grateful to my parents, who have always helped me with everything I needed so that I could concentrate on my work and have no other worries. Finally, I would like to thank my daughter Jannah and my husband mas Budi, for being the lights of my life, and for giving me the necessary distraction and faith in my work - Damai Selamanya.