Facultative river dolphins: conservation and social ecology of freshwater and coastal Irrawaddy dolphins in Indonesia

Kreb, D.

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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...
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).

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