



Can eco-tourism save the Ayeyarwady Dolphins?



Tun Naing casts his fishing net in the Ayeyarwady River. Photos: Rachna Sachasinh

RACHNA SACHASINH

THE dolphins of the Ayeyarwady River have some new allies in their fight for survival.

The Department of Fisheries (DOF) and Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) are preparing to launch a community-based ecotourism project in the Ayeyarwady Dolphin Protected Area (ADPA).

Expected to kick off in late 2015, the proposed ecotourism project will create viable income opportunities for communities located in the ADPA and support on-going dolphin conservation efforts.

Created in 2005, the ADPA encompasses a 74-kilometre (46-mile) stretch of the Ayeyarwady River between Mingun and Kyaukmyaung. However, the range of the Irrawaddy dolphin in Myanmar is known to extend north to Bhamo in southern Kachin State.

Data collected by the DOF indicates ongoing threats to Irrawaddy dolphins, even in the protected area. In 2012 during an annual monitoring trip from Bhamo to Mingun, DOF recorded a population of 86 dolphins. By 2014, this number fell to 58. The persistence of electric fishing, gillnets and heavy-metal pollution from gold mining are the contributing factors for population and habitat loss.

The fate of the Irrawaddy dolphins is inextricably linked to the welfare of “cooperative fishermen”. In Mandalay and Sagaing regions, generations of dolphins and fishermen forged a remarkable relationship. By using voice and fluke signals, the Irrawaddy dolphins communicate with the fisherman and help corral small fish towards the fishermen’s boats. In doing so, the dolphins feed themselves and help fisherman fill their nets.

To date, six villages within the ADPA still participate in cooperative fishing. A total of at least 60 fishermen rely on cooperative fishing as their primary livelihood. Cooperative fishing requires tremendous skill in casting the nets, along with an ability to develop and nurture intimate relationships with the dolphins.

Cooperative fishing is also more effective. In 2006 and 2007, DOF and WCS conducted a study which found that dolphin-assisted fishing resulted in fewer empty nets and higher weight and value of the catch.

The practice of electric fishing – the use of electricity in water to stun fish – continues to be a critical factor both in the

decline of the dolphin population and in the depletion of the river’s fish supply. Some fishermen feel that a significant part of this stems from the fishing licenses offered by the Ministry of Livestock, Fisheries and Rural Development. The competitive bidding process and the short-term length of the fishing contracts encourages over-fishing, to the detriment of both dolphins and the cooperative fisherman.

From 2011 to 2013, cooperative fisherman experienced a 17 percent drop in income. Over 40pc of the fishermen say they have no other source of income, while about 38pc rely on additional income from farming. Agricultural income is susceptible to seasonal shocks, which make it inconsistent from year to year.

The DOF began working with WCS in 2002 to monitor and observe the Irrawaddy dolphins. Conservation efforts were amplified in 2007 and subsequent agreements see the collaboration between the two agencies extended through 2017. Part of the DOF and WCS’s conservation efforts include implementing a community-based ecotourism program with funding from the EU, to create viable secondary income for cooperative fishermen and their communities.

Deputy Fishery Officer of the Department of Fisheries, Mandalay Region, U Han Win says, “I hope that ecotourism will assist us in achieving dolphin conservation. By developing community-based ecotourism, not only will fishermen become more in love with and value dolphins, but also villagers and the general public will also become more aware and interested in conserving and protecting dolphins.”

“We have two target groups,” states Paul Eshoo, WCS conservation enterprise adviser, “the cooperative fisherman and the electric fisherman.” According to Mr Eshoo, ecotourism can help offset financial losses for cooperative fisherman and abate the lure of electric fishing.

Presently, several tour companies and private boat operators lead dolphin-watching tours that depart from Mandalay. Because there is little or no collaboration with the cooperative fisherman, these tours often return without seeing any dolphins. Additionally, all the money spent by tourists is pocketed by boat operators.

“We want to spread tourist expenditure by offering lodgings, meals and handicrafts in the villages. In this way, everyone involved can participate and benefit,” says Mr Eshoo.

Mr. Eshoo, who helped design and implement WCS’s award-winning Nam Et Phou Louey Night Safari, a community-based conservation and livelihood program in northern Laos, is optimistic that a similar approach will work in the ADPA corridor.

“In order [for ecotourism] to be effective, we have to make sure that dolphins are not adversely impacted. And, this means our efforts have to be coordinated and well-planned,” adds Mr. Eshoo.

WCS Ecotourism Manager U Thant Zin worked with DOF to scope the feasibility of an ecotourism program and to build a coalition among the projects’ stakeholders, including the cooperative fishermen, village chiefs, national and regional tour companies and the Mandalay-based tour boat operators.

WCS conducted in-person interviews with 45 cooperative fishermen to understand existing challenges with current tourist activities along the ADPA and in villages. WCS also sought the fishermen’s opinion on the types of ecotourism activities they wished to host. An additional survey queried tourists and Mandalay and Yangon-based tour companies and guide associations to see what types of cultural and ecological activities appealed to travellers.

In January, 2015, WCS presented their findings at a stakeholder meeting attended by the cooperative fishermen, village chiefs from cooperative fishing villages, the Department of Fisheries, private tour companies, the River Police and the Tourist Police.

Leaders of the cooperative fishermen and the village chiefs were unequivocal in their desire to host ecotourism programs. The private sector and government also expressed their support for an ecotourism agenda that would both mitigate electric fishing and expand income opportunities.

In order to mitigate negative impacts from tourism, WCS is working with village leaders and tour operators to agree on basic guidelines for dolphin watching, such as recommended boat speeds and group sizes.

A village-development fund will be established to provide incentives and assistance to communities to reduce threats in the ADPA.

“Our second meeting will be with the cooperative fishermen to decide how to use the village-development fund,” according to U Thant Zin.



Cooperative fisherman Tun Naing, 31, began fishing at age 15.



Cooperative Fisherman explain where they have seen dolphins that morning.



WCS ecotourism coordinator U Thane Zin (left) helps tourists spot dolphins along the Ayeyarwaddy River.

“In the next meeting, the exact program will be sketched, with agreements from participating villages on experiences offered, prices, group sizes, the exact nature of tourist participation,” adds Mr. Eshoo. “Then we will create the program, implement a test phase and build it out.”

Electric fishing allows fishermen to kill a lot of fish quickly, with very little effort. For some, the lure of quick cash that electric fishing offers is simply too hard to pass up.

By capitalising on tourists’ interests in culture and conservation, the ecotourism project hopes to introduce new sources of income for villagers. The ADPA ecotourism project will reduce the economic pressures that drive electric fishing, according to U Han Win.

Ultimately, the ecotourism project hopes to restore the population of Irrawaddy dolphins and to reinstate cooperative fishing as a profitable and secure livelihood.

NEW YORK

In eye-opener, NY Philharmonic plays Fukushima children

NEW York Philharmonic musicians are accustomed to playing the most demanding works, but they are also performing some that are deceptively simple – composed by children from Japan’s disaster-hit Fukushima.

In an exchange that has fascinated participants, children unschooled in musical theory are producing pieces that are transcribed and performed by Philharmonic musicians.

The project is part of the Philharmonic’s “Very Young Composers” project, which since its launch in 1995 has spread around the world with a mission to take children’s music seriously rather than passing it off as cute.

“I’ve seen so many hundreds of pieces written by very young composers and I’m just astonished, again and again, by how interesting and innovative the pieces are, because of course the children have none of the constraints that those of us who have studied composition have,” said composer Theodore Wiprud, the vice president for education at the Philharmonic.

Nine children from Fukushima between ages 10 and 14 are visiting New York as part of the project. Musicians from the Philharmonic will premiere the children’s chamber works at Lincoln Center on March 24, following inaugural concerts of Fukushima children’s works in February 2014.

Takehito Shimazu, a professor at Fukushima University who led the project locally, said that the children chose to express themselves in various ways, with not all of them directly referencing the March 2011 quake-tsunami that killed almost 19,000 people in Japan’s worst post-World War II disaster.

Shimazu also noted that the children came from the city of Fukushima, and not the worst-hit coastal area.

The children were told to



Musicians from the New York Philharmonic, accustomed to playing the world’s premier works, are setting upon a musical experiment by performing compositions of children from Japan’s disaster-hit Fukushima. Photo: AFP

experiment with instruments and to pursue the sounds that appealed to them.

To give a common thread, the youngsters were asked to work off the melody of “Choucho”, or “Butterfly”, a children’s song that is known in the United States as “Lightly Row”. Butterflies in Japanese culture often symbolise living souls.

The Japanese children sent their compositions to students their age in the United States, who offered their own musical responses that will also be performed by the Philharmonic.

The Very Young Composers program, started by composer and bassist Jon Deak, began at schools around the United States and has expanded internationally to countries including Japan, China, South Korea, Finland and Venezuela.

The Philharmonic enters at the invitation of school systems that are pursuing similar concepts. Venezuela is famous for its “El Sistema” plan that provides a public education in music to children across income lines.

Wiprud said the Philharmonic was open to expanding its program.

“The Fukushima experience does suggest that children who have been

exposed to trauma at some level may benefit from the opportunity to express themselves in the abstract form of music,” he said.

The Very Young Composers program also showed, he said, that the quality of children’s work was consistent around the world, despite their surroundings.

In the case of Fukushima, he said, “Despite the cultural differences in the way young people typically interact with their elders in Japanese society, once we had given kids there permission to be creative and to tell professional musicians what they want to hear, we got great results.”

The compositions from around the world could offer valuable material to musicologists, linguists or other scholars looking at how children’s minds function and whether cultural differences begin early.

Wiprud said that he often noticed pentatonic melodies, common in traditional Chinese music, from students in Shanghai. But not always.

“Sometimes you think you’re hearing it,” he said of cultural differences in the music. “But then it gets contradicted by the next kid.”

– AFP

WASHINGTON

Angelina Jolie has ovaries removed over cancer fears

HOLLYWOOD megastar Angelina Jolie announced this week that she has had her ovaries and fallopian tubes removed over fears of a hereditary form of cancer, following her double mastectomy two years ago.

The actress, who has lost her mother, grandmother and aunt to the disease, said she had the procedure last week after results from a blood test raised fears that she may be in the early stages of cancer.

Jolie’s publicising of her double mastectomy pushed the issue into the spotlight, sparking a debate about the pros and cons of the procedure as a preventative measure.

The announcement could do the same for ovarian cancer, which is the deadliest cancer of the female reproductive system, according to the American Cancer Society.

Although tests showed she was not in fact in the early stages of cancer, Jolie said she chose to go ahead with the surgery because of her family history and because she carries a gene mutation that had given her a 50 percent risk of developing ovarian cancer, the same mutation that put her at 87pc risk of developing breast cancer.

“I did not do this solely because I carry the BRCA1 gene mutation, and I want other women to hear this,” Jolie wrote in an op-ed piece in *The New York Times*, the same way she announced her double mastectomy two years ago.

“A positive BRCA test does not mean a leap to surgery,” said Jolie, who is married to fellow Hollywood heavyweight Brad Pitt with whom she has six children.

Her doctors said that she should have the preventive surgery about a decade before the earliest onset of cancer in her female relatives.

“My mother’s ovarian cancer was diagnosed when she was 49. I’m 39.” Jolie said that she had been preparing for the possibility of ovary removal ever since her double mastectomy, but thought she had plenty of time to plan the procedure.

But two weeks ago, she said, she got a call from a doctor who said her blood test results had “a number of inflammatory markers that are elevated, and taken together they could be a sign of early cancer.”

She was told to see a surgeon immediately.

“I went through what I imagine thousands of other women have felt. I told myself to stay calm, to be strong, and that I had no reason to think I wouldn’t live to see my children grow up and to meet my grandchildren,” Jolie wrote.

“I called my husband in France, who was on a plane within hours. The beautiful thing about such moments in life is that there is so much clarity. You know what you live for and what matters. It is polarising, and it is peaceful.”

She went to see a surgeon, the same one who had treated her mother and whom she last saw on the day that her mother died.

The examination and ultrasound were regular, so she waited for five days, saying she tried to stay calm and focused as she attended her children’s soccer game and went about her daily life. Then scan results came back clean.

“To my relief, I still had the option of removing my ovaries and fallopian tubes and I chose to do it,” she said.

The surgery has put the mother of six into menopause.

“I will not be able to have any more children, and I expect some physical changes. But I feel at ease with whatever will come, not because I am strong but because this is a part of life. It is nothing to be feared.

“It is not easy to make these decisions. But it is possible to take control and tackle head-on any health issue. You can seek advice, learn about the options and make choices that are right for you. Knowledge is power.”

Ovarian cancer often runs in families and is one of the deadliest forms of cancer because there are often no symptoms in the early stages.

Hollywood star and Bond actor Pierce Brosnan lost his first wife Cassandra Harris in 1991 and his daughter Charlotte in 2013 to the disease. Harris’s mother also died of ovarian cancer. – AFP