

Irrawaddy Dolphins in Sabah

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SANDAKAN: Dolphins are in our rivers. Irrawaddy Dolphins, to be precise. They can be found in the Kinabatangan River in Sandakan, Cowie Bay in Tawau and along the coasts of Sabah, Sarawak and Brunei.

Irrawaddy Dolphins are facultative river dolphins, meaning they not only swim in coastal areas but also make their way into rivers.

Teoh Shu Woan, a Marine Conservation Masters student at UMS who is currently conducting research on Irrawaddy Dolphins, has identified 28 Irrawaddy Dolphins in Cowie Bay.

“My current estimate through photo-id mark-recapture method is 28 but I need to do some adjustments to get a less bias estimate, but there are definitely more,” said Shu Woan.

According to Shu Woan, when fishermen collect fish from their nets, the Irrawaddy Dolphins would be waiting nearby.

“The fishermen would pick some fish that were caught in the net and throw them to the dolphins,” she said.

Shu Woan said the dolphins would not disturb the fish caught in the net but instead wait for the fish to be thrown to them.

Like most species of dolphins,



the Irrawaddy Dolphins are not aggressive. They are intelligent creatures that are also believed to have a mutualistic relationship of co-operative fishing with traditional fishers.

In Kinabatangan, they are viewed as something sacred.

“When they (Kinabatangan community) see the dolphins, they do not disturb them or call them names because they believe that doing so will cause a huge wave,” said Shu Woan.

However, the current fickle weather has forced these creatures to refrain from travelling upstream in the Kinabatangan River.



The Irrawaddy Dolphins sighted in east coast waters.

“According to interviews with the fishermen, they said during the dry season, sea water flows into the river, and I think the dolphin’s prey goes along as well, hence they see the dolphins travelling upstream. But this was a long time ago.

“Nowadays, there is no obvious dry/wet season and they don’t see the dolphins traveling upstream anymore,” she said.

Irrawaddy Dolphins are social animals that communicate with clicks, creaks and buzzes and often do not travel alone.

These dolphins are also found in the Bay of Bengal in the Indian Ocean, Irrawaddy River in Indonesia, Mahakam River in Kalimantan, Mekong River across South East Asia, Songkla Lake in Thailand and Malampaya Sound in the Philippines.