



A dolphin leaping above the water behind Manukan Island. Pic courtesy of Abd Aziz Hayal.

Dolphins sighting a good sign

DE 10-01-2013 1

Jason Santos

KOTA KINABALU: Recent sightings of dolphins near the Tunku Abdul Rahman Park, which went viral on the Internet recently, is a good indication of the local marine ecosystem, claim Universiti Malaysia Sabah's (UMS) Borneo Marine Research Institute Director, Prof. Dr Saleem Mustafa.

He said Sabah has the potential to become a place for dolphin and whale watching if the local marine ecosystem is effectively protected.

He said the mammal's echolocation system seems to have adapted to shallow coastal environment and may have the ability to sense conditions of the marine ecosystem.

"I must emphasise that there could be instinctive attributes and ability to perceive environmental cues that are not known to science but could be factors in the dolphin behaviour. This include their forays in the marine protected area so near the shore and so close to Kota Kinabalu," he said, Wednesday.

He said such sightings, however, are far from unusual, as most likely the mammals have a resident population in Borneo, and would venture into areas, especially where food is available and habitat. "Food supply is a major factor in the distance they travel and visit places," he said.

Dr Saleem added if the dolphins are seen with their young ones, it would further mean that the calves felt secure in the

area, as in shore and coastal areas, calves are protected from sharks. He said dolphins have good parental and nursing habits, as well as intelligent and fast learners, which may compel them to return to the same areas.

Hence, measures to protect the dolphins can also contribute to protecting the marine ecosystem in general.

"I would like to emphasise the importance of marine protected areas. We need to increase our marine protected areas ...if we want to have more sightings of marine mammals," he said. Recently, photos of dolphins have emerged online, after pods of dolphins were discovered by staff from the Borneo Dream Travel and Tours on Jan 3, while another pod was also sighted two days later.

Marine expert, Dr Lindsay Porter described the dolphins as mere visitors from further offshore, which is similar to what occurred near Tunku Abdul Rahman Park.

"Dolphins appear only sporadically, it is difficult to figure out what influences the dolphins' movements," she said. Borneo Dream and professional diver, Joanne Cotterill also said the mammals are normally found in deepwaters, where ideally there is more abundant fish life for them.

"We were indeed lucky enough to encounter the dolphins at the start of our snorkelling and diving trip," she said.

A dolphin that was rescued off Sulaman eventually dies at the UMS nursery last week due to suspected infection.