

ELGOUNA MAGAZINE

Winter 2012-2013
www.elgounamag.com
Life as it should be



the
learning
issue


CARE FOR DOLPHINS CAMPAIGN

Text: Françoise Ohayon Photographs courtesy of Freds Swim Academy

KNOWLEDGE IS THE STARTING POINT FOR PROTECTING WILDLIFE

The Dolphin Watch Alliance was founded 2011 in Gossau, Switzerland. It aims to facilitate ethical and financial support for projects that involve the research and protection of dolphins. It is entirely funded by donations, and the board is comprised of biologists and anthropologists from Zurich University as well as a specialist in marine mammal medicine and a marketing specialist from Walter Zoo Gossau. The Alliance supports and endorses the project Dolphin Watch Natural Underwater Science, which conducts over- and underwater research in an effort to gain new insights into the behavior of dolphins to be able to set up necessary protection zones in selected Red Sea locations.

www.dolphinwatchalliance.org

A group of dolphins swimming underwater in clear blue water. The dolphins are sleek and grey, with their dorsal fins visible. They are swimming in a loose formation, with some in the foreground and others further back. The water is a deep, clear blue, and there are some light reflections on the surface.

A scientist and a local swimming school partner to raise awareness about the plight of dolphins in the touristic areas of the Red Sea. A swimming fundraiser held at the Moevenpick last September has helped to finance their activities.

Swiss biologist Angela Ziltener (MSc), a research associate from Zurich University, launched the Dolphin Watch Underwater Natural Science project in 2009. It now operates under the umbrella of the Dolphin Watch Alliance (see boxed text) and, under Ziltener's direction, is actively engaged in the study and protection of dolphins in the greater Hurghada area.

The main research project pursued by Ziltener over the last three years resulted in a catalogue of 140 individual Indo-Pacific bottlenose dolphins. Each animal is named and identified by a photograph of the dorsal fin which, along with flukes and pectoral fins, shows distinguishing marks and characteristics in a manner similar to human fingerprints.

Observations made from the surface as well as during scuba dives allow the scientist to follow dolphin pods and study their habitat, range, and behavior. "I watch their daily life and how they hunt, clean themselves, sleep, and interact with one another," explained Ziltener. "I want to find out more about their needs; not just what they do but how they do it." Dolphins have been shown to be capable of innovation and the use of tools; for example, they have been observed carrying a sponge or piece of coral in their mouths while hunting for mollusks on the seabed in order to protect their noses from spiky creatures. They are also capable of teaching other dolphins such tactics, and this transmission of new knowledge within a specific group is a manifestation of culture.

Dolphin Watch Alliance and Freds Swim Academy came together to create the Care for Dolphins program in August 2012. This campaign aims to raise awareness about the excesses of the dolphin watching industry in the region. Indeed, swimming with wild dolphins has become an increasingly popular tourist attraction in

Red Sea beach resorts. As a result, multiple tourist boats and zodiacs follow the dolphins for several hours every day without maintaining the necessary 30-meter safety distance, and large numbers of snorkelers jump in the water directly into groups of dolphins. This is a source of stress and potential injury for the animals, and studies have shown that dolphins change their behavior, vocalizations, and even group structure under such circumstances, which can have long-term impacts on the Red Sea dolphin population.



"Do Not Touch" educational cartoon

"When you go on a safari, you don't drive into a herd of zebras, chase them off, or try to touch them," observed Angela. "But that's what people are doing in the water, showing no respect for the animals." In contrast, when Ziltener observes dolphins, she anchors her boat near a reef frequented by the dolphins she hopes to see and waits for them there. Dolphins are naturally inquisitive and come by themselves to check out the new arrivals. "They find us through echolocation and take the lead if they are in the mood to interact with us," she said. Freds Swim Academy Owner Sandy Weder El Sammra concurred: "It's very impressive to see how dolphins recognize Angela and accept her as part of the group."

"If you behave decently with wild animals, you get more out of it," stated Sandy. Care for Dolphins, along with other environmental organizations, advocates for better laws to be adopted and implemented to protect the wild dolphins of the Red Sea. They believe, however, that such advocacy is not enough, for by the time new regulations come into effect, harassed dolphins will have moved out of the range of boats from Hurghada and El Gouna, thereby depriving both scientists and tourists from the opportunity to see these precious marine mammals.

Thus, Care for Dolphins also works to raise awareness among the local population and visitors about dolphins' needs. Using Freds Swim Academy's existing network, the partnership places a strong emphasis on the next generation: children who might become excursion organizers or snorkel guides and who can already discuss the issue with their parents. Teaching aids include a brochure in English and Arabic explaining basic facts about dolphin physiology and behavior and cartoons illustrating what dolphins like and dislike. This fun approach to education allows children to sympathize with the needs of social animals that live, play, and rest together, but do not like being chased by boats or touched by swimmers.

Swimming lessons are another opportunity to raise awareness. Swimming club participants at El Gouna International School are told that 4,000 laps in the school's 25-meter-long pool roughly correspond to the distance swam daily by a wild dolphin; such analogies help understand why a dolphinarium cannot possibly compare to a life led in the wild. "Only those who know and understand nature are willing to protect it and take care of it" is the campaign's guiding principle.

To support the activities of the Care for Dolphins program, a fundraiser was organized on September 28, 2012, on the occasion of World Tourism Day at the Moevenpick Resort & Spa El Gouna. Following a breakfast buffet at the hotel, Ziltener gave a presentation for 30 residents, hotel guests, and employees assembled in a conference room. A charity swim followed in the hotel's lagoon; everyone had the opportunity to contribute, either by swimming or sponsoring a swimmer. The event saw 26 participants, including the Moevenpick's own swim team formed for the occasion, swim a total of 34,460 meters.

Prizes sponsored by Moevenpick and Freds Swim Academy went to Karim "Kimo" Khaled Mohamed and his mother Jill Falkous for swimming the most rounds in the Family category; they received a hotel day pass for two adults and two children that included lunch. Residents Hassan El Hakeem and Basil Denson were awarded a month's swim club membership and a free massage at the Moevenpick Health Club, respectively, for first and second place in the single swimmer category.

A total amount of 4,500 LE was collected on that day; 3,000 LE out of the total was donated by the Swiss family of a swimming instructor. The money will be used to support the Care for Dolphins campaign in two areas. First, it will help fund Dolphin Watch research activities, thereby supporting the acquisition of knowledge essential to the protection of the animals. Second, it will be applied toward promoting awareness among the population through educational programs. Such programming includes visits to schools to teach children about dolphins and



A day out at sea to learn about dolphins

their needs, the holding of swimming and dolphin awareness camps during school holidays, and public presentations in hotels and other community venues discussing bottlenose dolphins living in the Hurghada area and explaining how to interact with them in a respectful and sustainable way.

Boat trips can be organized on request for participants to learn about dolphins with Angela Ziltener. The Care for Dolphins team hopes to make such awareness trips available for residents, but they are not meant to become a regular business activity. //

www.carefordolphins.org