



For Immediate Release

Ocean Park Conservation Foundation Handled 51 Cases of Cetacean Stranding in 2016/17 with Human Impact a Contributing Factor **Breakdown by Species: Finless Porpoise (69%), Chinese White Dolphin (20%)** *OPCFHK extends remit to cover endangered Shark and Ray species*

(XX March 2018 – Hong Kong) In 2016 and 2017, the Cetacean Stranding Response Team from Ocean Park Conservation Foundation, Hong Kong (OPCFHK), worked with the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD), to investigate 51 stranding cases. This included 10 Chinese white dolphins, 35 finless porpoises and six other cetaceans, with human impact contributing to the deaths. From 2016 onwards, the OPCFHK also extended its stranding programme remit to respond to threatened shark and ray cases.

Ms. Suzanne Gendron, Foundation Director of OPCFHK, said, “The decision to extend the remit to shark and ray species was formed off the back of a whale shark carcass being found in the vicinity of Cheung Chau in 2015, which raised awareness of the lack of research into threatened species of sharks and rays stranded in Hong Kong waters. All of this was set against the backdrop of the widespread use of shark fin in the city. Since then, OPCFHK has responded to a number of cases, including bamboo sharks and an endangered Shortfin mako shark in 2017.”

Since May 2006, OPCFHK has been collaborating with AFCD to investigate cetacean stranding cases in Hong Kong. Ocean Park also supports the Cetacean Stranding Response Team with technical expertise through Ocean Park’s veterinary team and the Marine Mammal Department. Since the arrangement started, the team has responded to 374 cases, including 106 Chinese white dolphins, 251 finless porpoises and 17 other cases.

By far the most common species responded to, the conservation status of finless porpoises and Chinese white dolphins is a great indicator to assess the general health of Hong Kong’s marine ecology, as both species reside in Hong Kong waters, in the heart of the city’s intensive urban development. Their population distribution, behaviour and survivorship provide valuable insights into the impact of human activities on marine life, and the threats brought about by marine pollution and fishery equipment. **The OPCFHK has concluded that the three major causes of death for cetaceans are:** fishing net entanglement, trauma caused by boat strike, and pneumonia, parasitism and bacterial infection.

Ms. Mandy Lo, Scientific Officer of OPCFHK, said, “We can only confirm the cause of death in a limited number of the cases, mainly because most of the carcasses we respond to are badly decomposed when discovered. From those identified, ten out of 25 stranding cases in 2016 showed evidence of human causes, including the presence of trauma, entanglements and lesion scars. In particular seven finless porpoises, two Chinese white dolphins and one pantropical spotted dolphin were found with evidence of blunt force trauma and entanglement. After necropsy procedures, the veterinarian team at Ocean Park was also able to determine the likely cause of death for a few cetaceans. For one finless porpoise it was acute death: trauma followed by presumed drowning, another finless porpoise’s cause of death was starvation, and one Chinese white dolphin died from



asphyxiation. In 2017, there were five additional suspected cases of death caused by boat strike trauma and five from entanglement.

“Hong Kong and the wider Pearl River Estuary (PRE) is a very crowded place and the best way to minimise human impact on cetaceans and other species is through educating the public. Recently we have focused on encouraging the public to minimise marine debris, such as through reducing the number of drinking straws they use, which can cause death to marine species. There is also a danger of boat strikes killing cetaceans and members of the public should only join eco-tours that follow dolphin watching guidelines. These include watching dolphins from a distance, and not touching, feeding or attempting to harm them. To minimise the chance of a boat strike, vessels should also slow down when a dolphin has been sighted and go at a slow steady speed,” continued Ms. Lo.

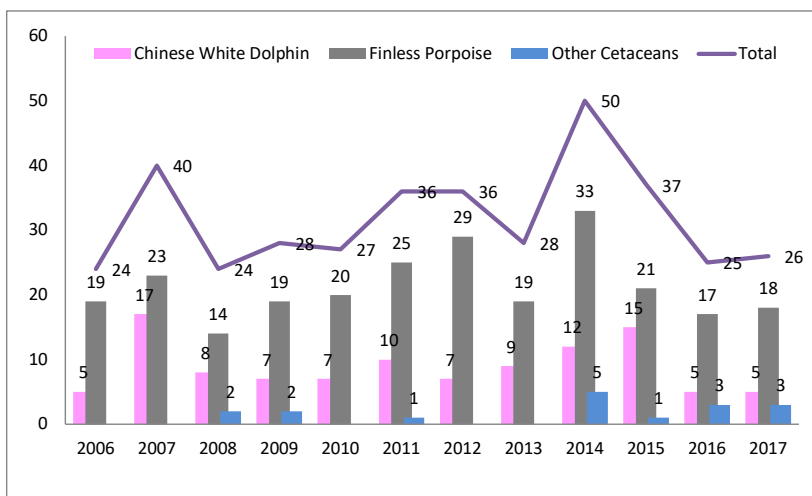
The OPCFHK stranding response team also cooperates with Chinese authorities on stranding cases. In 2017, a live Chinese white dolphin in Jiangmen was found stranded up river, OPCFHK assisted in efforts to guide it back out to the sea but these failed. Elsewhere, in 2016 three pantropical spotted dolphins were seen in the Tai Po and Sai Kung areas and the OPCFHK and AFCD went out to assess their status. One spotted dolphin then remained in Hong Kong, but later swam to Mirs Bay, and crossed into Chinese waters, where OPCFHK assessed its health condition, ID matched it and identified it as the same dolphin swimming in Hong Kong waters. In late 2017, it was found swimming in Hong Kong waters once more and its progress is being monitored.

Over the years, several species of cetacean usually found in deep water have been discovered in Hong Kong and in the wider PRE which has relatively shallow water. An example of this is a sperm whale which was found in Guangdong, pregnant and entangled in a fishing net. After being released from entanglement, she became stranded in even shallower water. While the reasons for cetacean stranding in shallow waters is still relatively unknown, one reason could be sonic blasting used for scientific research, an impact known to affect deep water diving cetaceans.

The distribution of stranding cases mirrors the habitats of different cetacean species. As finless porpoises mainly appear in the eastern and southern waters of Hong Kong, OPCFHK responded to a number of strandings in Sai Kung waters and in Shek O in 2016/17. Chinese white dolphins, on the other hand, are primarily active in the western waters of Hong Kong. Correspondingly, there were a number of cases located near Lantau Island. Other locations where cetacean stranding cases were investigated included the south of Hong Kong Island, Lamma Island, and Cheung Chau. A map of the geographical distribution of stranding cases is available for viewing by the public at: <https://hkstrandingdatabase.knack.com/hk-stranding-database#map/>.

Ms. Lo added, “Given the number of stranding cases and the prevalence of severe decomposition, we urge the public to call the 1823 hotline as soon as they spot a suspected case. This will give our team a better chance of collecting the carcass for fresh samples for accurate analysis.”

Historic breakdown of cetacean stranding cases by species



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About 1823 Cetacean Stranding Hotline

Since 2006, Ocean Park Conservation Foundation, Hong Kong (OPCFHK) has been collaborating with Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) to investigate the dolphin stranding cases in Hong Kong. People are asked to call 1823 Cetacean Stranding Hotline to report a stranding. OPCFHK's Stranding Response Team will attend the site to collect samples for testing, retrieve the carcass for necropsy, or rescue the live dolphin in collaboration with Ocean Park Corporation. Samples collected help to obtain important information, e.g. age, sex, accumulated pollutants, pathogens and even cause of death.

Finless porpoises and Chinese white dolphins in Hong Kong waters continue to face various threats, including habitat loss and disturbance and pollution. Test results from samples collected help us learn more about the cause of death, their biology, as well as the current status of their habitat, in order to further conserve the species. The major diagnosed causes of death include diseases or parasites, net entanglement and vessel collision. Unfortunately, we could only confirm the cause of death in around 10% of the cases, mainly because most of the carcasses were badly decomposed when discovered. OPCFHK will closely monitor stranding cases and provide suggestions to relevant Hong Kong departments and the Marine Mammal Conservation Working Group regularly, to better conserve local cetaceans and their habitats.

About Ocean Park Conservation Foundation, Hong Kong

OPCFHK is committed to advocating, facilitating and participating in effective conservation of Asian wildlife, with an emphasis on Chinese white dolphins and giant pandas as well as their habitats through partnerships, fundraising, research and education. It envisions a world where Asian wildlife remains biologically diverse under the stewardship of humans, corporations and governments.

Since its expansion in 2005, OPCFHK has allocated over \$78.23 million to fund over 430 research projects on cetaceans, giant pandas and many other species. In 2017/18, OPCFHK is funding a three-year project to support scientific research, community education, as well as local capacity building projects to be carried out in Sanjiang Field Station, one of three field stations under Wolong National Nature Reserve. It continues the operation of the Marine Mammal Stranding Response Team in Hong Kong and providing samples to local universities and the Chinese White Dolphin DNA Bank in China, to develop an effective conservation plan for the species. Giant panda conservation efforts were extended from infrastructure rebuilding after the earthquake to conservation study, capacity building and habitat restoration in the three provinces of Sichuan, Shaanxi and Gansu. It also inspires university students to engage in field work as part of its University Student Sponsorship Programme in Wildlife Conservation, and connects secondary school students as well as corporations to horseshoe crab conservation efforts in Hong Kong through the rearing and fostering programme.

As a conservation charitable trust supporting conservation across Asian region, OPCFHK needs your support to sustain these efforts. Donate and join the Friends of the Foundation membership club now to make a difference! For details, please visit <http://www.opcf.org.hk/en/fof.php>



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