

DON'T FORGET THE DOLPHINS!

by **Trevor W. Hearl**

In 1992, St Helena's 'Sustainable Environment Development Strategy' (SEDS) was hailed by Secretary-General Maurice Strong of the Rio Earth Summit as "probably the first true plan for sustainable development anywhere in the world".

It had been pioneered by The St Helena Working Group (SHWG), formed under the UK Dependent Territories Conservation Forum in 1988, and when, in March 1995, the island held its own SEDS Seminar, it was addressed by six eminent conservationists, members of SHWG, concerned to maintain its momentum. Significantly the seminar was staged, not in a central auditorium, but at the Agriculture & Forestry Department's Research Station for, on St Helena, the SEDS program is seen as an "A&F" matter. As a result the marine environment has tended to get overlooked in this context, including St Helena's dolphins, whose welfare has been recently of international concern.

Two questions have been asked. Firstly, how serious is the illegal killing of dolphins at the island to provide a traditional local delicacy? Reports from "yachties" and visitors prompted the Cape Dolphin Action and Protection Group (DAPG) to ask the St Helena Government (SHG) to investigate but SHG's reply referred only to foreign vessels licensed to fish for tuna in St Helena's oceanic waters and for "bait" offshore, thus raising the second question: to what extent are St Helena's dolphins being taken far out at sea by foreign tuna fishermen? Such issues are not easily resolved. SHG only licenses long-line tuna fishing to avoid netting dolphins but cannot monitor reports - which it claims to be too "commercially sensitive" to be revealed anyway -and relies on foreign fishermen's good faith.

At St Helena, dolphin-hunting has long been illegal under the threat of a £1,000 fine, but enforcement has not proved easy. Visitors' anecdotal evidence about "dolphin on the menu" must be treated with caution, for "dolphin" to islanders means the small (75cm) Dolphinfish (*Coryphaena equiselis*), which also makes excellent eating. Nevertheless SHG has plans (given below) to meet overseas criticism, and it is around broader issues, of more positive value to the Island, that the dolphin debate should now turn.

THE REAL DOLPHIN DEBATE

Two types of dolphin, the most intelligent and appealing of marine creatures, grace St Helena waters. They are the Bridled Dolphin (*Stenella attenuata*), confusingly called "Bottlenose porpoise" by local fishermen; and the rarer Bottle-nose Dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*), which they call "cow-fish". Elsewhere, dolphins - which are not fish, but mammals - show such a friendly affinity towards man that they have been trained to perform in Dolphinariums and even to guard against underwater intruders at submarine bases. This doglike trainability inspired further studies which

alerted scientists to the inhumanity of their killing and to the threat posed by new fishing methods, first recognized in 1969 through the plight of Pacific dolphins. Hazardous research by Dr W.R. Perrin of the U.S. Fisheries Science Centre in California led to his discovery that fishermen were there killing some 250,000 annually in order to net the tuna which swam beneath dolphin herds. Public anger forced a ban on their hunting or harassing in U.S. waters in 1972, which other countries followed, St Helena in 1979. Dr Perrin was then asked to investigate Atlantic dolphins and in 1983 visited St Helena to study its “Cetacean Fauna and Former Dolphin Fishery” for the International Whaling Commission (IWC) and the National Geographic Society, among others.

THE DOLPHIN RUN: A NEGLECTED ASSET

Two characteristics of St Helena’s dolphins particularly intrigued him. The first was the dramatic daily “dolphin run” off the island’s northwest coast where every morning, several hundred swim slowly between Egg Island and Lemon Valley before passing Jamestown with displays of “high leaps, forward flips, pitchpoling and tail lobbing”. heading seaward at noon. The second betrayed more unusual behaviour. Having long been harpooned by Jamestown fishermen using old whaling techniques, St Helena dolphins had become resentful of man and “kept their heads down”. But if hunting ceased (by no means certain, a fisherman confided, “for it’s only to get the Governor a knighthood”) they would become quite tame though, as Dr Perrin told the IWC in 1985 this would require “conditions of sustained benign interactions with humans” (p.427). After “making up to them” for a few days however, they responded so well that he joked, “the island would have a million-dollar industry if it was off our coast!”

Though this vision of the “dolphin-run” as a “natural marine experience for students and tourists” has yet to be shared at St Helena, Bill Perrin’s interest has never waned. Admitting “a special feeling for the place and the people”. he still hopes they will one day cherish this remarkable resource. Thus, the launch of Marine Studies at the Prince Andrew School found him, in April 1991, eager to help:

“Please let me know how the dolphin run turns out. I would suggest that some live bait be obtained from fishermen or caught by the students and released to the dolphins on each trip. This will gradually make the dolphins perceive the daily visit in a positive way and perhaps make them approach the boat more closely. They definitely reacted to me when I got in the water with them, but aggressively (jaw clapping). They also avoided surfacing at the front of the moving skiff where they used to be harpooned. With patience it may be possible to train them to take fish from the hand [...] a situation like this in the Bahamas brings in several hundred thousand dollars a year in tourist traffic”.

No such innocent interest in its dolphins was felt on St Helena, apparently. Hopes were revived among members of the St Helena Working Group two years later, however, when SHG funded Miss Tayne Peters to undertake dolphin research dur-

ing a Waste Marine Studies degree course. Assuming this to be linked to SHG's latest Tourism Study (1993), Dr Graham Drucker of the World Conservation Monitoring Centre, Cambridge, once again invoked Dr Perrin's assistance. Miss Peters gained a good Honours Degree, but rejected SHG's offer of a senior post in the Fisheries Service to apply for a higher degree course in the United Kingdom, causing "considerable disappointment" "superbly on the island and presumably a setback to dolphin management and its role in tourism.

The Tourism Advisor meanwhile also had his disappointments. Watching dolphins at play during his visit in 1992 and realizing their potential, he hoped to feature them in an appeal to a "niche tourism market". But SHG could offer no information about its dolphins and certainly nothing to show "special interest tour operators [...] that their clients can get close enough to the dolphins to enjoy the experience". From his own praise, observations he could only conclude that, if managed, "dolphin-watching could support the general attractions of St Helena". (Tourism Study, pp 12-13).

DOLPHIN MANAGEMENT: A HERITAGE ISSUE

St Helena's dolphins are not there only to entertain tourists, of course; they are a vital part of the island's natural heritage. While not requiring rescue from extinction like St Helena's Ebonies and Earwigs, they need conservation management no less than other fauna and flora. As it is, experienced dolphin-watchers like Dr Perrin have been caused more concern about protection than management. While organizing a UN dolphin symposium in March 1995 he tried to assess recent evidence from St Helena:

"It was long a practice to harpoon Bottlenose Dolphins that are attracted to the Steps by flying fish around the lights there. I thought that this had stopped, but I guess teenage boys [...] would have the stories and recollections of older fishermen to give them the idea [...]. It's a bad practice not only because of the inhumaneness and waste of it, but because the population of Bottlenose Dolphins around the island is not likely to be very large and could well be adversely affected by the take of just a few animals".

As for Bridled Dolphins, Dr Edwards considers that illegal catches are probably too few to affect the population adversely though the ethics of such catches are another matter. He recalled the dolphin fishery's highly developed tradition:

"Almost the whole of the dolphin carcasses including lungs, kidneys, stomach, liver and gonads was utilized in one way or another. The prized cuts of meat were from the ribs and neck and the meat was often cooked with the skin and blubber attached, usually in curries. Oil extracted from the head was used to oil tools and fishing gear whilst that from the was used for oiling watches or other fine mechanisms. Waste not, want not!" (p.13).

THE FRIENDLY DOLPHIN: SYMBOL OF THE SEAS

It is, fundamentally, a cultural question and custom is hard to change. Perhaps other similar cultures have ideas to offer. Australia is now publicizing its achievements in “Environment, Conservation, and Technology”, managing its Hour-glass Dolphins, through a special stamp issue and a “superbly illustrated book”.

In Britain, the friendly dolphin is traditionally the symbol of old fishing ports like Poole, where “the king of fishes” dominated the borough’s coat of arms long before St Helena had even been discovered, and where they would no more have eaten dolphins than dogs. Tradition is different at St Helena, but in today’s “global village” some local customs have to change. Luckily in the case of its dolphins St Helena can turn a liability into an asset, replace criticism with praise simply by showing visitors their dolphins at play rather than offering them dolphin steak for dinner!

Steps are already being taken by SHG to meet its critics’ concerns. Indeed Whitehall is impressed that SHG is doing “all it can to conserve its marine environment and should be commended for its efforts”. Its dolphins are considered to enjoy as much protection as Government can provide. They are listed as a protected species and a publicity campaign is being launched by the Senior Fisheries Officer and the Chief of Police to ensure that the law is understood. Two Sea Fisheries officers are being appointed to ensure enforcement. But will they be involved in dolphin management, for example to enable SHG to answer tourist operators’ questions on its marine attractions? If not, however commendable, it is difficult to see how this advances dolphin management beyond 1979!

Finally, another voice has yet to be heard in this debacle, that of St Helena’s fishing industry. Evidence is mounting that, as in the north, so now the South Atlantic is being overfished. Even its seabirds are suffering according to ornithologists! How will this, combined with dolphin conservation, affect their industry? Worried local fishermen want to know. The fact is that no one knows. Perhaps if “A&F” meant “Agriculture & Fisheries” on St Helena as in Britain, the marine ecology study planned with the SEDS program would have provided some answers by now, but it has become a separate issue. “The marine side of things is rather stalled. We need a good new inventory of what there is, and what effects current fishing practices are having on the various species and habitats”. Meanwhile, a correspondent warned that in every island issue “there is a careful balance to be drawn between social, economic and environmental needs”. And so, we hope, the debate will continue - but don’t forget the dolphins!

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Personal communication indicated in the text; to correspondents who kindly commented on a previous draft, I offer thanks and the hope that revisions accurately reflect their information.

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