



## THE ISSUE

The iconic Chinese white dolphin (*Sousa chinensis*) has had precipitous population declines in Hong Kong waters with over 80% loss in the past 15 years. In 2019, the dolphin numbers in Hong Kong waters have dropped drastically to a historic low of 32 individuals, a decline of over 30% compared to data released in 2018, according to the 2018/19 Marine Mammal Monitoring Report issued by the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD). The survey indicates that only 16 dolphin calves were spotted, which is the lowest since 2003, implying an ongoing decline in reproduction. These findings raise a red flag that the species' disappearance in Hong Kong waters is imminent, highlighting the urgent need to conserve the remaining core habitats for dolphins.

There are only about 2,500 individuals (within the context of an estimated minimum viable population size of 2,000 dolphins) within the Pearl River Delta region (PRD). Within the Greater Bay Area, the dolphins are threatened by five major human impacts: 1) habitat loss and degradation from coastal development; 2) underwater noise arising from marine traffic and development works that interfere with their acoustic hunting behavior and disturbs other activities; 3) vessel collision, particularly with fast-moving vessels; 4) prey depletion from overfishing and unsustainable fishing, and 5) pollutants and toxins from runoff and near-shore human activities.

## WHAT WE ARE DOING

The decreasing dolphin population in Hong Kong is an urgent call for Western and Southern Lantau waters – which may be one of the few remaining core habitats in the PRD – to be managed as a Dolphin Conservation Management Zone with several nearshore critical habitat zones where the speed and use of vessels will be strictly managed. The Lantau Dolphin Conservation Management Zone will contribute to Hong Kong's ongoing efforts to expand the marine protected area system (MPA) to cover 30% of Hong Kong's marine environment by 2030, through the gazettement of a network of science-based strict no-take reserves, fisheries management zones, community-based fishery reserves, and other MPA designations benefitting from well-enforced and science-based management.

The dolphins have been found shifting their favoured habitat southwards since 2015, likely in response to disturbance associated with multiple coastal development projects underway in North and Northeast Lantau waters. Busy marine traffic is also potentially impacting local cetaceans, especially along the two existing major vessel routes, namely Adamasta and West Lamma Channels. Some researchers suggest that small boat strikes may be as deadly to cetaceans as large vessel strikes. Vessel collision appears to impact more severely on the more open-water finless porpoise (*Neophocaena phocaenoides*), as the total number of porpoise strandings last year accounted for about 10% of the estimated population within Hong Kong waters.

On top of the challenging conditions off South Lantau stemming from boat and ship noise disturbance and potential collisions with vessels, a sound propagation modelling study conducted by WWF-Hong Kong last year estimated that the soon-commencing pile-driving for the construction of liquefied natural gas terminal off Southeast Soko Islands is likely to significantly disturb dolphins in the area, including those found in the proposed South Lantau Marine Park.

This activity further threatens the shrinking local dolphin population. Much of the critical dolphin habitats that have been identified by both AFCD's monitoring report and WWF's

underwater sound studies are not within any currently committed marine parks. The current MPA designated as a mitigation area for the third airport runway construction does not meaningfully address the needs of the dolphins. They are not utilizing the reserve habitat as they did before the construction and there is no sign of their return.

## **OUR ASK**

- To stabilize and recover the remaining dolphin population, WWF strongly urges the government to take significant remediation and conservation action now. WWF proposes the following measures be adopted as a matter of urgency:
- Expand and connect the existing marine parks to establish a science-based, well-connected, and well-managed network of critical foraging, socializing, and resting habitats. By 2020, establish a Dolphin Conservation Management Zone across the Western and Southern Lantau waters, with critical foraging and resting habitats strictly managed in terms of vessel traffic and speed;
- Set up a community-based working group that includes relevant government authorities, academics, NGOs, local community, dolphin-tourism companies, fishers, and village leaders to co-manage the Dolphin Conservation Management Zone; and,
- Require development projects to robustly assess potential threats from proposed construction works, especially noise impacts, on local Chinese white dolphin in the Environmental Impact Assessment.