

Dolphin study carries hopes of improving ties with humans

By NAMI SUGIURA/ Staff Writer

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A dolphin jumps around in the waters near Amakusa, Kumamoto Prefecture, on May 24. (Nami Sugiura)



in the last fiscal year.

Officials are observing wild dolphins here where they are easily spotted from afar to use the collected data for education and tourism.

Sightseers are said to be able to encounter the marine mammals on more than 90 percent of the boat tours here.

About 130 dolphins in a pod have already been identified based on their dorsal fins, among other features, under the endeavor that began last year. Their behavioral patterns and other details are also being uncovered.

COMFORTABLE WATERS FOR DOLPHINS

Dolphins here spend almost an entire year in a zone called Hayasaki Seto at the entrance to the Ariake Sea. Around 200 Indian Ocean bottlenose dolphins are estimated to live there.

The area is rich with fish, a food source for cetaceans. Traditional free divers also do not drive dolphins away during their fishing operations, allowing them to coexist with humans.

Hayasaki Seto is famed for its fast current. The current also dramatically changes in the strait, which is as narrow as less than 5 kilometers wide, with tides.

Elements that can affect dolphins' traveling patterns--such as the tides, the time of day and the feeding grounds--are being researched in the zone.

The results have revealed they stay on the strait's eastern side at high tide, and they can often be discovered along the western side when the tide is at its lowest.

The findings are consistent with locals who say dolphins "are off Tsujishima island at low tide" on the strait's western side.

A boat survey is done once a week as well to examine the marine mammals' conditions. Mainly, their dorsal fins are photographed so their shapes can be closely examined upon returning to land to identify individual dolphins.

To date, 130 dolphins have been distinguished from one another that way.

Injured dolphins are found under the program at times, too. Takasaki said over the past several months, a young dolphin had been seen entangled in what appeared to have been a fishing line.

The crew members of dolphin-watching boats are likewise interviewed about when and where they come across the oceanic creatures.

IMPROVED COEXISTENCE

AMAKUSA, Kumamoto Prefecture--One recent morning, the dorsal fins from a pod of dolphins were visible from the coastline along a national road.

Hiromi Takasaki, a member of the dolphin lab of the Amakusa Fisheries Cooperative commissioned by the Amakusa city to research them, pointed to the offshore area.

"The group's head is over there and the rear can be seen at that point," Takasaki, 45, said on the morning in late May.

She recorded the location and time on a research form on a smartphone as the pod moved from the eastern side of a strait to the outer sea that day.

The observations are carried out three times a week, with a total of 122 such studies conducted

Amakusa city is planning to use the amassed data for tourism, as well as for educational and environmental purposes.

The local government believes that emphasizing dolphins' positive relationships with residents, including their friendships with skin divers, will contribute to more fascination with the marine mammals beyond simply showcasing them to sightseers.

Takasaki, who referred to Amakusa as a "sanctuary for dolphins," said she hopes her survey will lead to the realization of a sea friendly to both dolphins and humans.

She believes that Amakusa serving as a base for a range of people to engage in education, environmental preservation and academic research with the help of dolphins will enliven the regional community.

Takasaki's dream is to see an oceanographic college campus established in Amakusa at some point because of the city's collaboration with educational establishments and research institutes.

Looking into the animals' living conditions may alike result in the introduction of observation rules friendlier to both visitors and dolphins, she said.

Such criteria will be possible solely in Amakusa, as people and dolphins live so close to each other in the region, she added.

"I would like dolphins to lead the initiative to heighten our municipality's values," she said. "Our study should act as a catalyst toward that goal."

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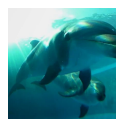
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