
This was basically a follow-up to the Seminar, entitled Marine Mammals Conservation in Malaysia: Adopting Sustainable Management Strategies, organised by MIMA in 2009, where various issues and threats to marine mammals’ survival were discussed.

One of the major shortcomings identified was the absence of a national marine mammal stranding response network in the country.

This Roundtable Discussion therefore emphasised in greater detail, issues pertaining to marine mammals’ survival and the need to conserve them.

Current standard procedures for rehabilitating stranded marine mammals in the country were also reviewed while exploring the expertise and facilities of relevant agencies and organisations in handling marine mammal strandings.

The meeting also discussed in detail, the setting up of a national Marine Mammal Stranding Response Network in Malaysia.

More than 20 participants from government agencies, academia as well as non-governmental organisations attended the meeting, signifying the importance of the issue.

Speakers were key representatives and experts from the Departments of Fisheries Malaysia and academic institutions.

The meeting comprised two main sessions with the first featuring key personnel involved in the study of marine mammals in the country speaking on the level of marine mammal protection and existing marine mammal stranding response strategies in the country.

The proposal to establish a national marine mammal stranding response network was also mooted and this was the main agenda of the second session in the afternoon.

Generally, strandings occur when marine mammals swim or float to shore and become ‘beached’ or stuck in shallow waters.

Although this occurs around the globe, their causes are still not well understood. Nevertheless, strandings have often been indicators of the health of the seas.

For instance, many strandings are thought to be linked to the impact of anthropogenic activities such as shipping, seismic surveys, fishing activities, military activities, and pollution.

Lack of vital information on these strandings and the lack of awareness of the necessary actions when dealing with strandings must therefore be addressed urgently.

In accordance to this, the meeting highlighted that there have been many cases of marine mammal stranding recorded in Malaysia, acknowledging the fact that the issue is more serious than anticipated as there could have been more cases that were not reported.

A majority of these stranding cases were not attended to promptly.

For example, in most cases, tissue samples were not collected from the carcasses prior to disposal or burial, resulting in the loss of valuable scientific information.

Knowing that there was still much to
be learnt about the population and conservation needs of marine mammals in Malaysian waters, it is therefore crucial that marine mammal stranding is handled in the most efficient and appropriate way to ensure the availability of data and information for future action.

The active participation and support from all stakeholders during the discussion may be the catalyst to kick-start the network.

Useful pointers to promote close coordination between relevant agencies, institutions and organisations including NGOs were also shared during the discussion to ensure a uniform and effective approach in handling marine mammal stranding in Malaysia.

Basically, it was agreed at the meeting that the following be established:

- A Working Group represented by all the relevant stakeholders that would meet on a continuous basis to discuss matters relating to marine mammal protection.
- A collaborative stranding response network, incorporating various expertises from relevant agencies and organisations, with the Department of Fisheries Malaysia as the focal point.
- The layout for an improved proposal to establish the National Marine Mammal Stranding Response Network was to be finalised, and this will be improved based on applicability from time to time.
- A Marine Mammal Stranding Response Guide to produced as a manual that could be used to attend to stranding incidences in a proper manner. Accordingly, training on the protocol and procedures should also be provided to those that will be facilitating and attending to stranding cases in the country.
- To look at the possibility of establishing a hotline for the general public to report on marine mammals’ strandings.
- To increase awareness of members of the public as well as the relevant stakeholders on the importance of handling strandings appropriately.

Nevertheless, some issues that still need to be examined and addressed include the possible funding mechanisms to establish the network in the country, as well as logistical support. It was highlighted at the meeting that existing sources be explored to the fullest, rather than creating new ones to ease implementation processes.

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