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# OMAN COULD SET BENCHMARK FOR GLOBAL DOLPHIN STUDIES

Hawana Salalah recently welcomed **Angela Ziltener**, a Research Associate at University Zurich and at TU Berlin, Campus El Gouna, for the second time. She first observed dolphins in 2004 while diving in Hurghada, Egypt, and immediately understood how important it is to study and protect the animals.



Angela Ziltener researching dolphin species

Angela started her own dolphin research project in 2009 and founded three years later the Dolphin Watch Alliance where she currently serves as president. Since then, she has studied bottlenose dolphins in the Red Sea and monkeys in the Amazon jungle in Ecuador and worked as a zoologist and visited nature conservation projects worldwide.

“The Sultanate of Oman is in the first stage of its touristic development, meaning the environmental impacts of tourism are still manageable. Oman has high potential to serve as an international example and benchmark in dolphin-watching tourism in Oman if it can pro-actively regulate dolphin tourism and avoid the negative impacts,” she says.

The seasonal tourism market in Salalah means that the number of boats is limited and Angela noticed that the small boats use ‘quiet’ engines and do not offer swimming-with-dolphin programmes from the boat, which is good because too many boats can disturb resting dolphins and interrupt their natural behaviour.

“Salalah is a unique place to observe Humpback dolphins. Normally, this species is very shy around boats and swimmers, and they are hard to approach. But here they do not seem to be distracted by them because the boat numbers are limited. We could also observe them hunting cuttlefish and in the early morning hours resting

along the coast. Around Mirbat, the Indo-Pacific bottlenose dolphin spends time resting in lagoons and also along the coast. If they are awake and socialising with each other, they even can come very close to swimmers to check them out, they are very friendly and curious towards other species such as humans. These areas are a gift which must be well-preserved,” she explains.

Angela also praised the guides in Salalah for not offering swimming-with-dolphins tours, which can disturb the pods by sailing too close to them and even spread diseases when the swimmers try to touch them. Instead, guides share their own personal experiences with the dolphins they saw with the guests.

“Going forward, it is very important to educate the guides and captains about dolphin biology and why it is important to follow a Code of Conduct. Sometimes, dolphins are approached too fast by boat and the recommended clearance distance of 50 metres is ignored. Although dolphins are friendly species, one shouldn’t forget that they are predators and may be aggressive if they feel threatened. Hence educating tour guides is essential so they recognise warning signals and avoid any mishaps from happening. The guides will then pass their knowledge to their guests, offer higher quality tours and help to educate tourists around the world.”





Visitors to Hawana Salalah and Mirbat can see three species of dolphins in the seas around Hawana Salalah, the Indo-Pacific bottlenose dolphin, the Indo-Pacific humpback dolphin and the common dolphin, but while they have few natural enemies, human activity has put them in danger. Water pollution, boat collisions (or ship strikes), hunting and bycatch has seen their numbers decrease around the world.

We must do all we can to protect the natural environment, so to become a more responsible tourist and make the most of your sightseeing trip, here are ten things to know about dolphins.

**1** Dolphins are mammals and not fish. They have lungs and breathe air like humans. They are able to hold their breath for more than ten minutes.

**2** Dolphins sleep while they are swimming. They sleep only by using half of their brain at a time while closing one eye. Dolphins are voluntary breathers, as they don't have a breathing reflex like humans. Take extra care when approaching dolphins during their sleeping time.

**3** Dolphins can reach speeds of up to 35km/h while swimming and dive to depths of 300 metres..

**4** Especially Indo-Pacific bottlenose dolphins love to play with seaweed, pieces of coral, jellyfish and other sea creatures, often using the coral, sand and sponges in the sea to clean their skin.

**5** Dolphins can hunt in the dark without using their eyes. By sending out high-pitched sounds, they can use the echo to locate prey, such as squid, fish and crustaceans. Engine noises can disturb their feeding patterns.

**6** Dolphins can live for up to 50 years and maintain friendships that can last a lifetime.

**7** Dolphins are highly intelligent and can recognise themselves in a mirror.

**8** Dolphins are part of the family of whales that includes orcas and pilot whales. Killer whales are actually dolphins.

**9** Dolphins are very social, living in groups that hunt and play together. Large pods of dolphins can have 1,000 members or more like the common dolphins.

**10** Dolphins have acute eyesight both in and out of the water. They hear frequencies 10 times the upper limit of adult humans. Their sense of touch is well-developed, but they have no sense of smell.

*Around the Ocean, located in Hawana Salalah, offers sea excursions where visitors can enjoy watching dolphins in the near distance. For bookings, call +968 9933 7524.*