

Whalespotting in the Bay

Rubaiyat Mansur & Elisabeth Fahrni Mansur go surveying dolphins in the Bay of Bengal and return with sweet memories of close encounters with water-blowing whales

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e packed our bags with great expectations. Arriving at Cox's Bazar, we were met by an international team of scientists from the Bay of Bengal range states—Myanmar, Bangladesh, India and Sri Lanka—and Brian Smith, a dolphin and whale specialist. This was the first survey of a programme that will investigate dolphin and whales (collectively known to scientists as cetaceans) in the little-known waters of these four countries bordering the Bay of Bengal, and create a regional network of trained local scientists.

After months of preparations, uncertainties about permission, complex logistics and formalities, the survey was finally ready to begin. Our excitement increased steadily during a three-day intensive training course where we learned about survey techniques, identifying cetacean species and using a GPS to track our progress and record sighting locations. While team members from Sri Lanka had observed many different cetaceans in their own waters, we did not know what was waiting in these unexplored areas of Bangladesh. Our goals were to find out which species thrive in the coastal waters of Bangladesh and estimate their abundance and document the threats they face. It was a big job but we felt confident with the intensive training we received and the enthusiasm of the team.

Our research vessel for the twelve days at sea was a modified local cargo vessel normally used for transporting salt. We built safety railings and observation platforms. Bedding was purchased and a simple kitchen set up. With ten crewmembers, loads of drinking water, supplies and equipment, the space for our 14-member team was sparse, but we were all so thrilled to be a part of this adventure that nobody complained about having to sleep next to bags of rice and potatoes (and sneezing colleagues). And the shower facilities—well, just imagine how good that first shower felt after 12 days at sea!

Finally it was time to set out. The provisions were packed, our equipment was installed and the construction work completed. The Bangladesh Navy would be monitoring the progress and safety of our research team via satellite phone. Starting from Cox's Bazar on February 16, we headed west and then south towards Saint Martin's Island.

Our first sighting was a group of about 45 bottlenose dolphins (*Tursiops*) appearing seemingly out of nowhere. It was an interesting sighting and we were perplexed by their stocky appearance since we had expected to find the more slender and long-nosed Indian Ocean bottlenose dolphin. But these more closely resembled the common bottlenose dolphin.

We felt exhilarated as these dolphins swam next to our boat, just beneath the surface of the clear water. We saw lots of mother and calves. The animals showed their bellies and changed direction with breathtaking speed. This sighting seemed out of this world. Now everything appeared possible! We were absolutely thrilled and had to be reminded of our duties to record our position on the GPS, write a species description, estimate the group size, direction of travel, and time of sighting, as well as collect data on environmental parameters such as turbidity, depth and salinity.

The third day, February 18, was calm and relatively uneventful. During the first days there had been quite a bit of rolling, so some of us appeared green and lost our stomach contents. But now the winds had settled and the sea was flat — ideal surveying conditions. Only the strong sun made it difficult to concentrate and made us tired at the end of a long day.

We were all getting used to our rotations and duties and moved around the vessel with growing ease. Putting on sun block, eating quickly and catching short naps between shifts, taking the equipment out at sunrise and away at sunset, and entering data for almost two hours every night — all this became routine. We anchored out at sea, with nothing in sight but the setting sun, moon and the stars. Flying fish and leaping marlins came back to us in our dreams as the waves gently rocked us to sleep. At dawn the muttering crew and Brian's wake-up call got us up for the first rays of the sun.

The next day, on our way to Chittagong to pick up a voltage stabilizer (after our patched-together dynamo system fried our surge protector), we encountered Irrawaddy Dolphins (*Orcaella brevirostris*). It was wonderful to see these animals so familiar to us during a survey some of us had done in the Sundarbans two years before. Entering the mouth of the Karnaphuli River, it was also great to see the freshwater dolphin shushuk (*Platanista gangetica*).

After solving our electrical problems, we headed southwest towards the Swatch of No Ground, a deep-sea canyon that extends into the shallow waters of the Sundarbans Delta.

Brian had carefully planned our track. We followed a zigzag line in and out of the coast, crossing changing water depths. The captain and his crew carefully followed the arrow on our GPS, although they often questioned the direction it indicated. The depth sounder didn't seem trustworthy enough to them — they preferred to use a simple bamboo pole. Thanks to good planning and the manoeuvring skills of the captain, we never got stuck on the sandbanks (although we came awfully close) of this huge delta. We remained busy during these days with an encouraging number of sightings of Irrawaddy dolphins and finless porpoises (*Neophocaena phocaenoides*). We had to take special care to be alert to detect these species because they both typically show very little of their body when surfacing.

On February 22, just as we crossed a distinct line of transition from cloudy green to deep blue and entered the deep waters of the Swatch of No Ground, one observer caught sight of a whale blow! We couldn't believe our eyes. As the magnificent animals surfaced, slowly, smoothly and exhaling a tall blow high, we were overcome by such awe that we nearly forgot to pick up our cameras to record the moment. We had never imagined such beautiful and huge creatures would be found in our own backyard. These Bryde's whales (*Balaenoptera edeni*) seemed undisturbed by our presence while we watched them feed. What a sight! Having discovered something wondrous, we anchored happily for the night at the edge of the Swatch ready for the next day's exploration.

Our next day was filled with amazing sightings of large groups of Bottlenose Dolphins, more Bryde's whales, birds and wonderful colour changes in the water. We even saw bottlenose dolphins riding the wake in front of a surfacing whale! We suspected that there might have been some fin whales (*Balaenoptera physalus*) mixed in with the Bryde's whales. With the help of photographs, the identification would be confirmed later. But for us, it was good enough to just know that there are actually whales out

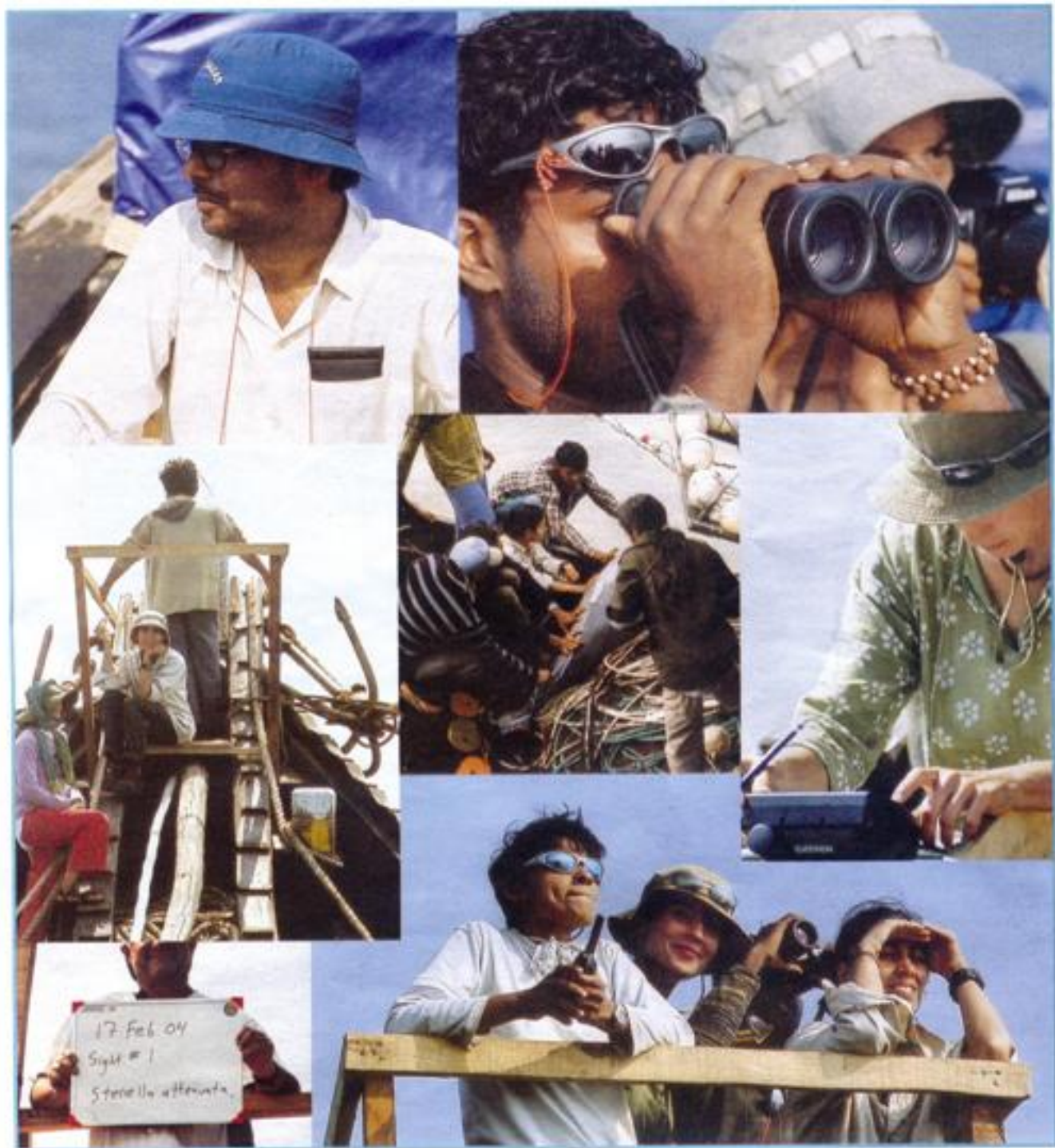
there. The sun set much too early that day. With just a small taste of the Swatch of No Ground, we knew we would go back to explore the deep waters.

On our way back east we zigzagged through shallow waters with our old friends, the Irrawaddy dolphin and finless porpoise. Searching the calm waters, which sometimes glistened like mercury, we looked forward to each day. This was especially true when it was our turn for bow duty. Here we stood high above the water surface and leaned over the edge as if a bird in flight. It was a sensation never to be forgotten.

On the outer fringes of the delta where the water turned from brown to green we also had several sighting of Indo-Pacific humpback dolphins (*Sousa chinensis*). The distinctive bright white appearance of the adults but dark grey colouration of the calves, and their sometimes active surfacing, made these animals relatively easy to spot and identify — in fact, one scientist characterised the species as the "perfect beginner's dolphin".

On February 27 we entered Chittagong Port, packed up our gear, said goodbye to the crew and the other team members and returned to our regular jobs and lives. In the next months the data will be compiled, analysed and presented together with the results of surveys from the other countries of the Bay of Bengal. The cooperative efforts of our international team, the boat crew, our cook, and the project's sponsors and local collaborators had resulted in a landmark study of the cetacean diversity in Bangladesh.

But our work has just started. Dolphins and whales are threatened by over-fishing, pollution and entanglement in gill nets. During the survey our team examined two carcasses of Irrawaddy dolphins. One of these was accidentally killed in a large-mesh gill net set to catch sharks. The fishermen told us that during an 8-day trip, four dolphins had become entangled in their net and died. This information was alarming and made us worry that without conservation attention these animals may disappear from Bangladesh's waters. Now the challenge is to turn concern into action so that dolphins and whales can continue to thrive in the Bay of Bengal. ●



The international team that Rubaiyat Mansur and Elisabeth Fahrni Mansur were a part of was trained and led by Brian D. Smith, a conservation zoologist with the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), USA. The survey was sponsored by the WCS, the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society, UK, and the Convention on Migratory Species, Germany, in collaboration with the University of Chittagong, the Saint Martin's Marine Park, the Biodiversity Conservation and Ecotourism Development and the Bangladesh Fisheries Research Institute. Guidance and logistic support were given by Professor Benazir Ahmed of the University of Chittagong and The Guide Tours Ltd.