

Guild Report – April 2023 - Whales & Dolphins Conservation

Bernard Purrier is a volunteer speaker for this charity which focusses on sea creatures and which rather strangely, is based in land-locked Chippenham. He gave us a delightful whistle-stop tour of fascinating facts about cetaceans (the posh name for whales and dolphins), and a selection of these facts follow.

There are nearly a hundred different species in this group, and they are mostly very intelligent and there have been many recorded cases of them assisting humans in peril (is that an intelligent action or not? You decide).

These creatures are mammals, and there are many ways of distinguishing them from fish. Cetaceans are warm blooded, not cold like fish; they give birth to live young, not eggs; they have lungs, and not gills; and their tails go up-and-down, not side-to-side. As mammals they have a lot more legal protection than would be the case if they were fish.

Unfortunately, they are still endangered by over-fishing by certain nations, pollution (including plastics in the sea) and from all the marine noises that humans create and which interferes with cetaceans' communication and feeding.

One rather human-like trait has been spotted in young male dolphins, where one individual dolphin will approach the highly toxic Puffer Fish, and give it a very gentle squeeze, and as a result, get a small shot of the toxin for their trouble. However, this nasty toxin seems to give the dolphin a narcotic-type high. As soon as one dolphin has got his fix, he drops the puffer fish, and another one repeats the process. The street kids in inner cities have nothing on these creatures.

Apparently, cetaceans do not sleep in the way that we recognise it. Rather they sleep with one side of their brain, and then the other, but never both at once. If food or danger approaches, then they can immediately snap back into full wakefulness.

We were invited to marvel at a few of the very large cetaceans. The best-known example is the Blue Whale – the largest creature ever to have lived on the planet and which weighs up to 200 Tonnes and can be 32 metres long. Mind-blowingly large, but it eats only krill - a small fish only a couple of inches long, it gets through roughly an elephant's weight of krill each day.

The Giant Squid (a fish) lives around 1.2 miles below the surface, where the water pressure is 100 times that at the surface. The Sperm Whale feeds on the Giant Squid and there is evidence of titanic struggles between these monstrous creatures. The Sperm Whale can stun the Giant Squid by emitting a sound louder than that of a Jumbo jet, but the Giant Squid can turn the tables by grabbing the Sperm Whale in its tentacles and holding it in the deep for around two-and-a-half hours, in order to drown it.

There were lots more great titbits in this interesting talk but not enough space to record it all.

These are intelligent and fascinating creatures and for an hour in our Reading Room in April, Bernard brought their story alive.

Richard Death