

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS:

What level of protection do cetaceans enjoy in Malta's territorial waters?

Though all cetacean species (dolphins and whales) are legally protected on paper, there is still much that needs to be done to effectively protect cetaceans and the rest of the marine life in our seas. Legal protection usually entails the responsibility of having regular and financially supported monitoring of cetacean species, so as to check the success of policies put in place for their conservation. Of course awareness is also important and BICREF has really worked hard toward this too.

Which cetacean species are endangered?

Most cetacean species are in danger of decline as synergistic human impacts increase in their habitats. In particular common dolphins (*Delphinus delphis*) and Sperm whales (*Physeter macrocephalus*) Mediterranean subpopulations have also been categorised as endangered in the Mediterranean. Regular monitoring and sustained research is essential to rate the level of risks of decline through time in our region of the Mediterranean.

What are the main cetacean conservation challenges?

Without a doubt the main cetacean conservation challenges include improved policies and enforcement of conservation legislations; the real set-up of conservation management strategies which include long-term monitoring; and the adaptation of policies according to the results of such monitoring. With long-lived and elusive species such as these, it is not easy to assess the needs and levels of risks of each species. The marine environment is also changing rather fast with more traffic, pollution (chemical, physical, noise and light pollution), climate change effects, over-exploitation of natural resources, etc. So unless rigorous scientific research is undertaken regularly, it is easy to find that management based on superficial knowledge would not lead to the desired conservation target.

In recent years, has awareness about the importance of such conservation increased?

For this reason local cetacean conservation research, which started of in 1997 by Dr. Adriana Vella, Ph.D (Cambridge), Conservation Biologist at the University of Malta, was aimed to be a long-term effort. Fortunately this scientific research attracted citizen science contribution as well soon developed into the NGO BICREF (The Biological Conservation Research Foundation) which works as a voluntary non-profit organisation to assist research and promote awareness of the needs of cetacean species in our waters. This entails understanding the biodiversity and relationships between biological systems and the human activities too. The latter have both positive and negative effects on nature and cetaceans.

When was the first Bicref Award organised and with what aims?

As part of BICREF's efforts to promote the presence of the different species of cetaceans in this part of the Mediterranean, the BICREF-RMSR AWARD for the Best Cetacean Sighting Reports was set-up in 2000 in collaboration with the Royal Malta Yacht Club. This project invited all participating crews of the Rolex Middle Sea Race to contribute by taking accurate records of the sightings of all cetaceans species during the whole stretch of the race. This was indeed a challenge that saw and still sees real crew members consider more than just the waves and wind during this race but also

the spirit of the sea itself represented by dolphins and whales. Ignoring what they represent and what they contribute to reflects lack of consideration for marine life altogether. Cetaceans are considered flagship and umbrella species. Their healthy presence reflects the health of the marine ecosystem too.

What value do the sightings reported during the Rolex Middle Sea Race add to your research?

Though ongoing local cetacean research has been undertaking the demanding task of studying these species through out the year and for many years, the contributions from sea-users are also useful. In particular the Rolex Middle Sea Race contributes due to its long and well-established track thus providing valuable data that may be linked to specific spatial and temporal parameters. Of course the success of this contribution lies in the hands of each crew and the value given to such a challenge. Will our race be just a race through space or will it be a race through space and nature? Some participants have been really enthusiastic in their contributions and have shown us that there is no difference between age or sex on how effective such contribution can be if there is the will to do so. BICREF put a lot of time and energy in preparing the adapted fill-up forms for participants to read just before leaving for the race and then filling-up properly during the race to finally stress the importance of immediate return of these filled-up folders to the RMYC or BICREF members. For this reason even mobile numbers and emails are supplied to make it easier for any crew arriving to port to contact and talk to BICREF members about the race's experience in this new dimension.

What further knowledge is needed to enhance conservation efforts?

If this data is supplied by every or most participants there would be interesting outputs that may be used as an indication of how cetacean presence is changing through time at that specific time of the year. Of course this data would complement ongoing long-term research efforts around the Maltese islands too, so the former would mean little without the latter. The Rolex Middle Sea Race crews have an opportunity to contribute toward our greater understanding of some aspects of these species, which often come to encourage and energise the RMSR participants during their race!

What other projects and research do you undertake?

Dr. Adriana Vella, has developed various other projects that did not exist before in Malta, apart from scientific cetacean research which allows for the study of associated species too such as turtles, seabirds and rays, she has developed research on marine biodiversity conservation around our coasts as much as offshore considering fisheries and fishermen, she has developed new tools to understand biodiversity which also includes molecular genetics applied to understand the relationships and structure of populations enabling better conservation strategies. Conservation research also necessitates an understanding of human activities and investigating what is sustainable and what is not. This has kept Adriana and members of her research group in close contact with people considering Maltese heritage and aspirations to see local wild species provide goods, services and inspire us all to safeguard our natural capital.

What other entities/individuals assist you in your research?

BICREF has both local and foreign volunteers which in turn also work with research members of the Conservation Biology Research Group at the University of Malta. These entities have always been open to assist and collaborate with genuine entities seeking to improve the local, regional or global conservation efforts. In fact BICREF and the CBRG-UoM are also partners of the regional agreement to protect cetaceans, ACCOBAMS and Adriana has also been national contact persons

the European Cetacean Society for many years. These and many other efforts by Adriana and her teams have placed Maltese Cetacean Research on the Map and has also contributed to attract the European Cetacean Society Conference to Malta in 2015.

Apart from other entities such as the AFM, Maritime Section of Transport Malta, the RMYC, Fishermen, and various sea-users who have been assisting in various ways, BICREF obtains kind assistance by entities that are ready to cover the financial costs of local awareness efforts, such as Vodafone that gave a grant for the production of the award winning one hour documentary *Waves of Life* or VASCAS for sponsoring the take-home trophy of the **2014 BICREF-RMSR Award**.

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