



The carcass of a whale that was stranded and rescued but later found beached at the same spot it was first stranded in Pulau Gaya, Sabah, in 2006.

# Save our marine mammals

THEY are exotic creatures, so, too, their names.

Irrawaddy, bottlenose and Humpback dolphins. Bryde's and pygmy sperm whales. Throw in a variety of dugongs and what a rich mixture of mammals these heavyweight sensations of the sea make.

The mammals have a few brief hours of stardom when they are beached, with all the media and public attention on them.

On the day the beached mammals die, buried together with them are the media buzz and community hype.

While Malaysian fascination with these marine creatures is understandable, Malaysian Nature Society conservation officer Fairul Izmal Jamal Hisne hopes this interest would extend beyond stranding cases.

"If we are concerned about marine life and wish to help, we can start by reducing the probability of them being stranded in the first place," he says. "And this can only come with a better understanding."

The country, particularly Peninsular Malaysia, is greatly lacking in data on marine mammals.

Although there are studies on whales, dugongs and dolphins by Malaysian universities, they are few and far between as these creatures are expensive to study and hard to spot.

"We don't know their status and population size. We also don't know how our waters are significant to them," says cetacean expert Dr

**Some 30 species of dolphins, whales and dugongs cavort in Malaysian waters but few of us know of these heavyweight sensations until they are washed up dead or stranded on the beaches. The Malaysian Nature Society hopes to create awareness among Malaysians so that these mammals can stay alive in the seas, writes CHAI MEI LING**

Louisa Ponnampalam. "But it's likely that some, especially those from coastal habitats, feed and breed here. Malaysia has very warm and productive waters."

Fairul says frequent spotting of juvenile dolphins is a sign that Malaysia could be a breeding ground.

In the past, there had been sightings of Irrawaddy dolphins in Malacca, Penang, Langkawi and rivers in Sarawak, and bottlenose dolphins in Langkawi.

Indo-pacific Humpback dolphins were spotted in Port Klang and Carey Island.

"The presence of dolphins shows a healthy environment because they are fussy, hygienic creatures," says Fairul.

"And being mammals, they are our closest relatives in the sea. They have the same biology. They contract the same diseases as we do, like high-blood pressure, cancer and stomach illnesses.

"So, studying them gives us an idea of how degradation of the aquatic environment affects us."

More information will also lead to better protection of these mammals, some of which are listed in the International Union for Conservation of Nature red list, and understanding of why and how they got trapped in shallow waters or ended up on the beach.

A theory suggests that disturbances to the earth's magnetic field could have disorient-

ed their migratory tracks. Juvenile dolphins could also have misread the changing of tides and were caught too near to the shore.

But since most of those stranded were found hurt, the reason could be that they were too sick or injured to swim.

For this reason, one preventive measure is for fishermen to use dolphin-safe nets.

These are nets with an opening at the end which allows caught dolphins to escape, or metal ones like those used in tuna fisheries, which are detectable by dolphins which use echolocation.

While the majority of Malaysians are not fishermen or boat owners, we can help by keeping the sea clean so that



IF YOU wish to help raise funds for Malaysian Nature Society's projects, such as its marine mammal conservation initiative, why not do it the healthy way?

Join the Standard Chartered KL Marathon 2009 on June 28, from which MNS and four other organisations stand to benefit.

By signing up, participants pledge to raise a minimum of RM500 as donation by June 1 to qualify as charity runners. There are five categories — Marathon (42km), Half Marathon (21km), Men's (10km), Fun Run (5km) and Kids Dash.

The start and finish point will be at Dataran Merdeka and the total prize money offered is RM350,000.

Aside from participating in the race, Malaysians can also contribute by sponsoring listed runners through their customised online donation profile. Closing date for registration is Wednesday. For more information, log on to [www.kl-marathon.com](http://www.kl-marathon.com).