It will come as a surprise to many that the UAE may prove to be host to over one third of the world’s 80 or so species of whales and dolphins. Not only that, but some of these may even be sub-species new to science and unique to the region.

The Union National Bank Whale and Dolphin Research project began in February 1995. The initial aims are to establish baseline data regarding the status and distribution of cetaceans. Genetic studies and research on the effects of pollution on dolphins have also begun, in coordination with the Centre for Dolphin Studies in Port Elizabeth, South Africa. All data are to be geared towards successful conservation management of this fascinating and remarkable group of marine mammals.

The first phases of fieldwork were conducted along the coasts and offshore islands to the west of Abu Dhabi. Whales have been sighted in areas to the far west, beyond Jebal Dhana, though reports of their presence have also come from the islands of Zerkouh and Qarman. There is little doubt that the Gulf waters of the UAE host a number of different whale species. Apart from live sightings, in the four months since inception of fieldwork, four relatively freshly dead whales have been found on beaches and the remains of at least a further seven discovered. In some cases, identification is difficult, for example, when only a few of the bones have been found, but the species found probably include: blue whale (Balaenoptera musculus), fin whale (B. physalus), minke whale (B. acutorostrata), sei whale (B. borealis), Bryde’s whale (B. edeni) and false killer whale (Pseudorca crassidens). Genetic analysis of collected skin and bone samples will confirm which species occur.

Dolphins have also been seen on many occasions in many areas. Particularly striking is the relative abundance of both bottlenose (Tursiops truncatus) and Indo-Pacific humpback dolphins (Sousa chinensis).

The Indo-Pacific humpback dolphin is a particularly interesting species about which very little is known. IUCN
The World Conservation Union - list it in their Red Data Book as 'Unknown', but it is generally thought of as a species under threat due to its preference for shallow, coastal environments. Throughout its range, it generally occurs in small groups of between six and ten individuals and occasionally up to 25. On two separate occasions, in two separate localities groups of over 30 Indo-Pacific humpback dolphins were discovered and observed for many hours. This constitutes the largest two groups of the species on record. The dolphins were active at times, leaping clear of the water and interacting with one another. One young male performed a backward somersault, an unusual acrobatic display for this species. Feeding behaviour was also observed, sometimes in water less than one metre deep.

Bottlenose dolphins were also frequently seen, sometimes in mixed pods with Indo-Pacific humpback dolphins. Large numbers of dead bottlenose dolphins and other forms of marine life is cause for concern. The remains found were of animals that had died anywhere between one month and three years previously. On one day a seven hour walk along beaches revealed the remains of 28 bottlenose dolphins, three common dolphins, one spinner dolphin, one false killer whale, one baleen whale, 26 dugongs, 32 green turtles, one loggerhead turtle, two sea snakes, over 30 seabirds, such as cormorants, gulls, terns and flamingos and many large fishes. Many skulls were collected for deposition in the Natural History Museum at the UAE University in Al Ain, once they have been properly measured and catalogued. Numerous samples were also taken for genetic analysis and where possible, pollution and stomach content analyses. The numbers of remains found suggests the possibility of death where human activity is a causal factor.

One of the most exciting elements of field research was the discovery of a finless porpoise (Neophocaena phocaenoides), found on a beach on the island of Murawah.

That several new records can be made in just a few months field study is testament to the value of this region to marine mammals and the lack of research carried out until now. Research on marine mammals in the UAE has really just begun. The discoveries made by the Union National Bank Whale and Dolphin Research Project illustrates the wealth of information that is to be revealed, the value of that information both to local requirements and the international scientific community, and the need for focused study in the future.

An inherent component of any successful conservation project is the need to create awareness. To this end, results of the research have been turned into a hardback book on the subject, published in both Arabic and English. The book is the first publication on whales and dolphins to come from the UAE and details our knowledge of cetaceans here to date. A foreword for the book has been written by H.E. Sheikh Nahayan bin Mabarak Al Nahayan. Chapters include information on each of the species of cetaceans in UAE waters, as well as the intriguing relationship between fishermen and cetaceans, the history and evolution of cetaceans, conservation, and scientific research on the country's cetacean life. The text is complemented by over 100 colour photographs.

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