

Better off alive

The only hope for many endangered species is to show they're more valuable alive



ARNOLD LIM PHOTOGRAPHY

Dearden

by Peigi McGillivray

How can you protect an endangered species if it is worth more dead than alive? “The short answer is you can’t,” says Dr. Phil Dearden, chair of the University of Victoria’s geography department.

“We set up protected areas, fence them and guard them, but if the species we’re trying to save provides a greater source of income for local people when it’s dead than when it’s alive, we’re not going to succeed,” he says.

“The best way to make a real difference is to increase the economic value of the living animal and work to ensure that local communities receive the benefit.”

Dearden has been doing just that for more than 30 years. His conservation research focuses on establishing and managing protected areas in land and marine environments.

“I’ve worked in countries around the world, including Thailand, Mexico, China, Ghana, Sri Lanka, Cambodia and Tanzania,” he says. “Most of my work is focused on marine conservation in southeast Asia and Canada, because I believe our oceans present the biggest

global conservation challenge.”

Here in BC, Dearden’s research group helped develop whale-watching tourism in places such as Clayoquot Sound and Johnstone Strait.

“Ecotourism is one of the best ways to establish and maintain the economic value of living animals in protected areas,” says Dearden. “Whale-watching has provided concrete economic benefits to Island communities, and local residents can see that it is in their best interest to protect this resource.”

Dearden has taken his experience with BC whale-watching to countries such as Thailand, where he is helping to develop similar ecotourism benefits with whale sharks.

“Whale sharks are the largest fish in the world. They’re enormous, beautiful and slow-moving, and because they feed mostly on plankton, they pose little danger to divers,” he says. “Establishing a scuba-diving industry around them helps preserve this vulnerable species and draws attention to the plight of sharks around the world that are being depleted by overfishing.”

Dearden’s fascination with conservation extends far beyond whale and shark-watching.

His interests range from marine mammals and seagrass ecology, to coral reef monitoring, community-based governance of marine protected areas, and Indigenous perspectives on conservation.

He is also a devoted teacher. Every year since 1981, he has taught a first-year course that introduces students to the processes that support life and human impacts on them. Dearden’s graduate program attracts applicants from around the world, and he has supervised more than 70 graduate students during his 30 years at UVic.

Dearden has published nine books and more than 230 scientific papers. When he noticed there were no environmental textbooks written specifically for Canada, he co-wrote one that is now widely used in universities across the country.

“There is always something new to learn about how we interact with the natural environment,” says Dearden. “More and more species are threatened. We need to open people’s eyes to the issue and to the economic and social benefits that can come from protecting endangered species, rather than killing them.”

EDGEwise

In addition to whales and whale sharks, Dearden has helped protect forests in Cambodia, plovers in Malaysia, conservation parks in Tanzania and Ghana, dugongs (a marine mammal similar to Florida’s manatee) in Thailand, elephants in Sri Lanka, and tigers in China.

Dearden’s work in Thailand has provided evidence for conservationists to argue for greater protection for sharks. He’s now implementing a global survey on the value of shark diving, and he and his students are devising management guidelines for the activity.

Dearden is leader of the marine protected area working group of the national Ocean Management Research Network and co-chair of Parks Canada’s National Marine Conservation Area’s marine science network. He also leads the marine protected area research group within UVic’s Department of Geography.

UVic researchers were awarded more than \$104 million in outside research grants and contracts in 2008/09—more than double the research support of five years ago.

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