

# Free Dolphins of Shaab Sataya

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The Red Sea is one of the largest reservoirs of marine biodiversity in the world. Every day several dozen long-nosed dolphins (*Stenella Longirostris*)\* can be found in the lagoon of Shaab Sataya in southern Egypt. This extraordinary gathering is the focus of a scientific study conducted by Patrick Louisy\*\*, a doctor of oceanology and biology with the collaboration of ecological volunteers fascinated by marine life. The goal of the work is to better understand the behavior and the lifestyle of these animals in order to gather crucial information to help prevent anarchistic development of tourism which threatens the lives of dolphins.

One against another, the young playfully squabble, leaping at high speed, upward, downward, tapping noses , then twirling around in a cloud of a billion bubbles. A few curbed jumps and smacks of tails then, lightly rubbing against the water, the most reckless one pierces the surface to throw himself into the free air to execute a quadruple spin before falling heavily back into the water on its back. These underwater chases, worthy of any action film, do not distract the rest of the family from simply hanging out with a certain indifference. A mother with its baby, accompanied by a multitude of other cetaceans, promenade peacefully. There are more than 150 of them now. Further, two are coupling, escorted by a third predator ready to intervene if necessary...I film several curious females who come to brush against me slowly, almost subtly. I can touch them. I hesitate, and then, yes, it's extraordinary. My hand delicately strokes their black and grey skin which shimmers and camouflages itself in the sun's reflections. They look at me through timid eyes and laugh at the same time. Tears fill my eyes... I am swimming in the immense blue lagoon of Shaab Sataya, the paradise of dolphins.

INTERVIEW WITH PATRICK LOUISY :

*Patrick Louisy is Doctor in oceanology and Biologie. Scientific specialist of fish, He has also published more than thirty books on the aquatic world.*

**Q) What's the purpose of studying dolphins ?**

*One must be conscious that the context discovered in Sataya is completely exceptional: there are very few places in the world where one can imagine*

*encountering as many free and wild dolphins. Therefore this is an unique opportunity to advance the fundamental knowledge of the behavior and the lifestyle of these animals.*

*The first dimension of work produced in Sataya is therefore simply, due to this exception situation, to improve our scientific comprehension of the long-nosed dolphin, its social structure, its daily rhythm, etcetera...At the end of the project which should last two years, a scientific study will be published with the accumulated results and the conclusions that go with it.*

*It's also understood that the collected data can one day be useful to the Egyptian authorities in the hypothetical situation where it becomes necessary to envision measures that protect the site and its natural inhabitants, the dolphins, from human disturbances.*

**Q. Dolphins have a reputation of being “intelligent”, friendly and curious about man? What do you think ?**

*The notion of intelligence in animals is a delicate question. In the absolute, the question should be reserved to the human species, simply because only our own language is understandable enough to us to be able to interpret how a spirit within functions. In all other species that are not our own, we are incapable of accessing the psyches of an animal, its “soul”. On the other hand, if we give the term “intelligence” a wider meaning, the behavior of an octopus or a grouper can very well be qualified to be “intelligent”. One shouldn't talk about intelligence when referring to the behavior of dolphins.*

*What is certain however is that the long-nosed dolphins are very sociable animals, same as wolves, gazelles or choucass for example, on the same sociable level as humans. It's because of this characteristic that they have certain behavioral and communication capacities. (See below) Curiosity and the aptitude to approach and analyze a new situation are part of the necessary qualities of their lifestyle. One should not be surprised that they appear to be a bit curious and want to discover us just as we are to approach them.*

**Q) In observing the dolphins in the lagoon, I noticed a real social life among the animals -the mother and its baby, the young playing, the males on alert, coupling and games. One has the impression it's a big family that has gathered in one place. How do you explain this social phenomenon ?**

*Long-nosed dolphins always meet in important groups; they live within a society. Because of this fact, they are capable for example of communicating in a more elaborated way, to situate themselves in a social hierarchy, to share certain practices, to teach their young (or at least allow them to learn) during a period in their existence that is equivalent to adolescence.*

*What we observe in the lagoon of Sayaya is not very different from what happens in the herds of ungulates in the African Savannas! And if we want to compare with human societies, the dolphins of Sataya constitute a tribe rather than a family, individuals who are not specially related but share certain habits (such as those to frequent humans, a trait that appears to be “learned”) in some ways a communal cultural group.*

**Q. Why are you using ecological volunteers to study dolphins? And why dolphins? How do you explain this mix ?**

*From my point of view, the principle interest in asking for ecological volunteers is to provide an opportunity to gather workers for a restricted period to study and to observe a lot. During the days of the scientific study on the BSM voyage to Sataya in May, the accumulated effort of all the participants represented 70 to 80 hours of observation by day! This is quite substantial for dolphins let alone any natural study subject.*

*Why dolphins? As far as I’m concerned, it’s a domino effect of circumstances, a study project among others that was taken on during the Bio Underwater voyages. But it’s true that dolphins enjoy an excellent popular reputation, and attract, without doubt, more attention than the gobies dwarfs or the sand syngnathes for example.*

*As far as the success of finding ecological volunteers, overall, I’m not sure that it is developing as much as it should. Maybe it’s because the promoters of certain ecological volunteer programs are more interested in the financial participation of the volunteers rather than the potential of their work. Between us, there is nothing scandalous in asking for contribution from persons for a good cause but it’s a different approach for me.*

**Q) The development of mass tourism brings daily swimmers to the lagoon. That affects the behavior of dolphins, in particular, during their sleep. In one way or another, are the dolphins of Sataya threatened ?**

*During the BSM voyage in May 2008, the lagoon of Shaab Sataya was visited by two to three cruises on the average. Each time, visitors stayed between 30 minutes to one hour “snorkeling” in the lagoon. As much as we can judge in an empirical way before analyzing the registered data, the impact on dolphins can vary. From all evidence, the most important factor is the behavior of the “snorkelers” and the accompanying inflated boats. We observed that certain visitors who approached quietly had little incident with the dolphins whereas “intrusive” behavior brought about considerable perturbation. It also appeared that the disturbance occurred less when dolphins were naturally active. The development of the hotel business in the region of*

*Marsa Alam appears inescapable. We have little time left to study the dolphins and to describe their natural behavior in a undisturbed situations.*

**Q) How can we prevent the development of tourism from harming dolphins ?**

*It's too early to respond to this question however from our initial observations on the site and from our experience acquired in Shaab Samadai, it's already necessary to insist on a responsible behavior on the part of snorkelers and the drivers of inflated boats, and therefore instill a dimension of sensitivity and preliminary education. Moreover, it appears better to approach dolphins at the start of the morning and at the end of the afternoon, periods when they are generally more active and more disposed to frequenting humans or at least enduring their proximity.*

**Q) What fascinates you in dolphins ?**

*I have a habit of replying that they don't fascinate me any more than other marine organisms with surprising behavior such as fish, shrimp or cephalopods. It's a study like others. Except...when you are in front of a dolphin that voluntarily comes to see you, plays with you and appears to enjoy it, well, something special happens.*

**Q) What is the most beautiful vision or experience you have of dolphins ?**

*The most beautiful vision is often...the first. And for me, it was the first time that I realized in the lagoon of Shaab Samadai (Dolphin House) where I was swimming for several house that the dolphins were not only swimming by, they were coming to see me, to observe me. And in one particular moment, mothers wanted to show their baby this strange palmed monkey as if they were bringing them to a zoo!*

*As for the most moving experience, it is without doubt the first time a dolphin approached me to touch me, immobile, waiting, until I dared extend my hand gently and the dolphin leaned against it to be caressed...*

\* The long nosed dolphin (Stella Longirostris) measures 2 meters long weighs on the average 100 kilos. It is characterized by its long snouted nose and by its grey and white contrasted skin color. Its eye is outlined by a black line to its pointed muzzle. It feeds itself on small film and calamari caught during the night in water 200 meters deep. They travel in groups, most often 60 to 170 dolphins. Certain populations live in open water, hundreds of miles from the closest land, others follow the coastline. It is normally difficult to approach and swim in their company.

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