

Handover Mascot and Flagship Species: The Instrumentalization of Chinese White Dolphin in Hong Kong

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Abstract

The Chinese white dolphin is not only the most loved animal in Hong Kong but also the flagship species of the city, mobilized by conservationists to publicize environmental issues and drum up support for the conservation of the species' habitat. In addition, the cetacean has also been instrumentalized to convey political messages. This article aims to make sense of the social prominence of the Chinese white dolphin in Hong Kong by revisiting the cetacean's trajectory with the city while examining the efficacy and the potential negative impacts of the symbol in relation to conservation. Historically, public awareness of the species first surged due to the construction plan for Hong Kong International Airport, followed by the 1997 Handover, during which the dolphin was turned into a mascot to call for a more intimate relationship between China and Hong Kong, although some citizens professed their pessimism over the change of sovereignty by reading their misery into the mammal. The two events have offered fecund resources for conservationists to build up the flagship species. However, while citizens show general awareness and concern over the dolphins, the efficacy of the flagship species is low when leveraged against reclamation initiatives. The Chinese white dolphin can also be a double-sided sword for Hong Kong's conservation, given their absence in specific sites was used to justify various ecologically disruptive development plans. An additional observation is that there has been a resurgence among Hong Kong people to draw parallels to the plights of the cetacean after the political turmoil unveiled in 2019.

Introduction

The Chinese white dolphin is likely one of the most beloved animals in Hong Kong. Socially, the animal was chosen as the mascot of the Handover and was voted the favorite marine species in a poll conducted by the World Wide Fund for Nature Hong Kong (WWF-HK) in 2007. Culturally, it is a sought-after sight for eco-tourists. Ecologically, it has been designated as the "flagship species" by different non-governmental organizations (NGOs) "to increase public awareness of conservation issues and rally support for the protection of that species' habitat" (Caro 245). Furthermore, the dolphins are concerned by different

stakeholders, exemplified by NGOs' persistent research and lobbying work as well as the government's conservation policies. This article aims to make sense of the prominence of the Chinese white dolphin in Hong Kong by looking at the cetacean's trajectory with the city while examining the efficacy and the potential negative impacts of the symbol in relation to conservation. In particular, I look into how the dolphin has been instrumentalized as a conservation proxy and a vehicle for political messages, where the political meanings imposed on the dolphin in turn become a story conservationists rely on to justify the necessity for protection.

The article reveals that public awareness of the species surged first due to the construction plans for the Hong Kong International Airport, followed by the Handover, during which the cetacean was mobilized as an instrument to convey political messages that call for a more intimate relationship between Hong Kong and China. Nevertheless, the dolphin was also used by citizens to profess their pessimism towards the change of sovereignty. The two events have supplied vital resources for conservationists to turn the dolphin into another instrument—a flagship species. Borrowing Donna Haraway's concept of response-ability, "the capacity to respond, and so to be responsible," I argue that citizens show general awareness and concern over the dolphins (i.e., the capacity to respond), although the efficacy of the flagship species is low when leveraged against reclamation initiatives and protection achievement of the species (i.e., to be responsible), as reflected by the dwindling abundance in Hong Kong waters. In other words, the symbol has not stirred up effective protection nor conservation policies to ensure the well-being of the species. In addition, the Chinese white dolphin can also be a double-sided sword for Hong Kong's conservation, given their non-habitats have been equated as low in ecological value. Interestingly, while concern for animals remains a moral issue, the socio-economic values of the cetaceans are brought up by conservationists to show the importance of conservation, a narrative adapting to the dominant capitalistic ethos of Hong Kong.

Storytelling, Response-ability, and Flagship Species

Humans' treatments towards animals depend greatly on what stories we tell about them since animals are not only "natural," they are also "cultural" (Evernden 3; Wolch and Emel 18–19). As Melanie Joy (16, my emphasis in italics) goes, "how we feel about an animal and how we treat it, it turns out, has much less to do with what kind of animal it is than about what our perception of it is". It is precisely this power of

story that provokes Donna Haraway's (Staying, 12) advocacy of better storytelling since the practice is germane to multispecies justice, because "[i]t matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories." To Haraway (When Species, 71), central to storytelling is response-ability, "the capacity to respond, and so to be responsible."

People's response-ability towards animals varies since human-animal relationships are always contextualized. In general, the species humans are responding to and the sociocultural milieus are two important factors that mediate response-ability towards animals. For instance, companion animals (i.e., pets) and cute-looking animals usually attract more attention and protection, crystalizing different education campaigns and conservation policies (e.g., Fleming and Bateman 243; Kelso 178–180). Socio-cultural values such as religious beliefs are also important ballasts that shape how people treat and perceive animals, as manifested in different food taboos and the sacredness of animals (e.g., Harris 28–30; Poon 180). People also have higher response-ability towards animals that have great social and political significance. One renowned instance would be koala in Australia, which is not only the national symbol but also a "flagship species" of the country that reflects the forest health (Australian Koala Foundation). Conservation is not an easy task. Value and behavioral change depend on a complex system, from policy measures to education. Flagship species, "generally defined as high-profile, fascinating species having significant ecological roles with cultural associations" (Dietz et al. 33), are thus an important vehicle to convey conservation ideas, raise funds, and encourage protection policies. Besides koala, prominent examples include giant pandas, rhinos, and elephants, along with other usually cute, endangered, attractive, and big-sized mammals, although sometimes plants will also be chosen to assume the role, such as mangroves. On top of the charismatic allure, "narrators need to find a story to tell" about the chosen flagship species because animal symbols have to be constructed to generate response-ability (Barua et al. 433). The most important flagship species in China is the giant panda, attributable to the creature's role as the "national treasure." For instance, while both the giant panda and the snow leopard are classified as "Vulnerable" on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List and used as flagship species in China, people's familiarity and fondness of the former is greater than the latter (Yue et al. 8). The finding shows how political implications can motivate people to respond to a particular flagship species, which the example of the Chinese white dolphin resonates with since the species's former role as the Handover mascot was used by storytellers to justify why the society should be responsive to the mammal. In this article, the efficacy of the

flagship species is examined through the framework of response-ability, which is understood in two layers. The first layer concerns whether people can respond to, that is, be aware of and concerned about, the Chinese white dolphin, together with the larger environmental problems that the species is employed to represent, such as loss of habitat due to reclamation; the second layer focuses on whether the flagship species is compelling enough to make people take proactive and effective actions to conserve them, and thus “responsible actions.”

Although flagship species can be potent in disseminating conservation messages within constrained NGO budgets, many researchers have also shed light on the negative impacts of depending on conservation proxies (Barua et al. 431; Schlagloth et al. 130). In general, there are two main critiques. First, many flagship species are on the verge of extinction or endangerment, and the efficacy of the species might vanish once extinction materializes (Schlagloth et al. 130). This critique pertains to the paradox that once conservation equates to and over-relies on the existence of a flagship species, people might be misled that the absence of the species means there is no necessity to “respond and be responsible.” The second critique concerns how flagship species tend to receive more attention and research opportunities than other species, and the disproportionate knowledge can hinder the conservation of less studied ones (Caro 260). For example, in “All Creatures Are Equal, Though Some Are More Equal Than Others: The Moral and Political Agency of Koala,” Robert Kelso (178–183) sheds light on the skewed prominence of the conservation of koalas in Australia when compared to other lesser-known animals. The most prominent flagship species in Hong Kong is the Chinese white dolphin, a cetacean chosen as the Handover mascot in 1996 and heavily relied upon by different conservationists.

Research Data

This research employs story analysis to investigate the stories through which “response-ability” toward Chinese white dolphins was constructed, as well as the efficacy and potential negative impacts of employing the dolphins as a flagship species in Hong Kong. I examine the portrayal of the Chinese white dolphin in four major Hong Kong newspapers—Ming Pao, Sing Tao, Wen Wei Pao, and Hong Kong Economic Journal—covering the period from 1998 to 2023. The timeframe is limited by the lack of systematic news research engines on the city’s newspapers before 1998, while the choice of the four newspapers anchors on the wide value spectrum they represent,

ranging from politically neutral or pro-China to ideologically liberal to pro-development/economy. The reason why newspaper articles are studied pertains to the media's functions as the "iterative cycle" that reflects and shapes public opinions through different stories (Wolch et al., "Changing attitudes" 98) and their power to influence public perception, understanding, and actions, including policies toward animals (Jacobson et al. 172–174). This is especially true since humans' knowledge of animals no longer comes from direct encounters but mostly from media representation (Corbett 399; Gullo et al., "The Cougar's Tale" 140–141).

The Wisenews research engine generated 2,340 items that mention "Chinese white dolphin" (中華白海豚) in the four media outlets. After trimming away irrelevant accounts such as advertisements, 117 articles were selected for detailed analysis. To minimize bias, this study also reviews articles from online platforms, including *HK01* and *Inmediahk.net* (獨立媒體), and English-language sources, including *Hong Kong Free Press* and *South China Morning Post*, although inconsistencies in their archival records preclude their inclusion as primary data sources. However, the rhetoric on these platforms is similar to the stories in the four newspapers. Additional materials, such as NGOs' webpages and online forum posts, serve as supplementary data to provide a broader context to situate the research findings. This paper adopts "loose coding" during the research and writing stages, which begins with examining the connotations and narratives behind the stories from the news articles, and then selected quotes are chosen to represent the larger body of data (Jerolmack 76–77).

Furthermore, three interviews are conducted to record oral history and to study the efficacy of the flagship species. The interviewees are Chang Ka-tai Taison, the Chairman of the Hong Kong Dolphin Conservation Society (HKDCS); Dr. Thomas Jefferson, the Marine Mammal Biologist; one of the first three dolphin experts commissioned by the Hong Kong government in 1995; and Woo Ka-yi Doris, the Cetacean Conservation Manager at WWF-HK.

I also participated in the dolphin research trip organized by the HKDCS on November 12, 2022, to observe the species' habitat.

The (Hi)story of Chinese White Dolphin in Hong Kong

"Chinese white dolphin," or sometimes "pink dolphin," is the common name in Hong Kong and China to depict *Sousa chinensis*. Neonates are typically dark grey, transitioning to a body sprinkled with black and white spots amid maturation (see Figure 1). The pinkish hue is the

result of the blood flushing near their skin, which helps release heat (HKDCS). The Chinese white dolphin in Hong Kong belongs to “part of a large population (> 2,000 individuals) that inhabits the Pearl River Estuary” (Jefferson 771), meaning that the dolphins can swim freely across the border instead of only residing in the Hong Kong waters. As indicated by the other name “Indo-Pacific humpback dolphins,” the dolphin can also be found from “central China southward throughout Southeast Asia and westward to the Bay of Bengal” (IUCN).



Figure 1. Chinese White Dolphin. Picture by HKDCS.

With the world population of “no more than around 10,000 individuals” (IUCN), the species is classified as “vulnerable” on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. The Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department of Hong Kong (AFCD) has been recording the abundance of the species in Hong Kong¹, and the data from 2003 to 2022 is shown below².

¹ AFCD is responsible for Hong Kong’s conservation projects and issues, including Chinese white dolphin.

² The abundance was calculated with the method of “line-transect analysis” (Hong Kong Cetacean Research Project). Simply put, the method means selecting more than one “path” or “line” in the survey area, and researchers would record the number of research subjects they spotted while moving along the path. In the mentioned case, it means how many dolphins one can see when travelling the path. The research area covers the areas where Chinese white dolphin frequent, including northeast, northwest, west, and southwest Lantau. In addition, AFCD does not publish the data of the annual estimate of Chinese white dolphin abundance before 2003.

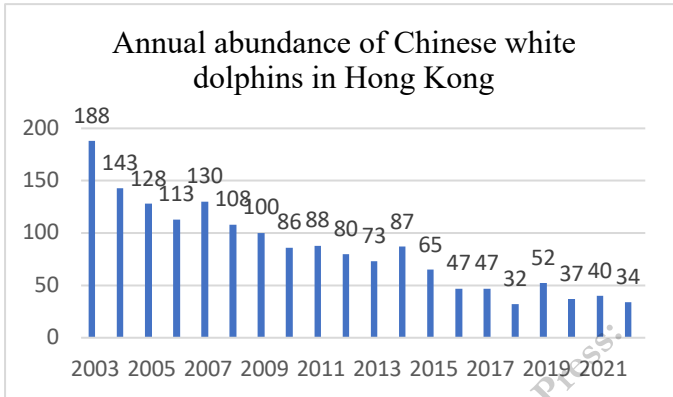


Table 1. The Annual Abundance of Chinese White Dolphin Dwindles from 188 in 2003 to 34 in 2022.

Habitat degradation, the risk of vessel strikes, disruption from dolphin-watching tours, water pollution, acoustic pollution, and fishery bycatch are among the threats leading to their decline despite concerted conservation efforts (HKDCS). Under Hong Kong law, it is illegal to hunt, trade, or possess these dolphins, as per the Cap. 170 Wild Animals Protection Ordinance and the Cap. 586 Protection of Endangered Species of Animals and Plants Ordinance (HKEl). Moreover, proponents of large-scale construction projects (covering an area of more than 50 hectares) impacting the dolphins’ habitats must secure approval from the Environmental Protection Department by submitting an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) report. This report, detailing project specifics, environmental repercussions, and mitigation strategies, must be publicly disclosed for community feedback (HKSAR Government, “Project Profiles”; Jefferson 718–719). Another measure is the establishment of marine parks, which foster conservation, education, scientific research, and recreation (AFCD). Activities such as development, unauthorized fishing, and operating vessels at speeds exceeding ten knots are prohibited in the parks.³

In 1771, Pehr Osbeck reported the sighting of a “snow-white dolphin” in the Canton River just west of Hong Kong in the Pearl River estuary

³ Until May 2024, there are seven marine parks, including Hoi Ha Wan Marine Park, Yan Chau Tong Marine Park, Sha Chau & Lung Kwu Chau Marine Park, Tung Ping Chau Marine Park, The Brothers Marine Park Southwest Lantau Marine Park, and South Lantau Marine Park. The latter four are set up to “help better conserve the Chinese White Dolphins and Finless porpoises, their habitats, and to enhance the fisheries resources therein” (AFCD).

(Jefferson 712). When asked about the origin of the name “Chinese white dolphin,” Dr. Thomas Jefferson said that it was a direct translation from its Chinese common name—中華白海豚 (“Personal Interview”). Despite being grey or pink, the dolphin seems white when viewed from a far distance and appeared white when their corpses were washed onto the shore, as explained during the introduction of the dolphin research trip. The fishermen in Hong Kong used to call them “sea pig” (海豬) and more commonly “*baiji*” (白忌) or “*wuji*” (烏忌), which mean white things and grey things that shall be avoided. As portrayed in newspapers’ accounts, the Chinese white dolphin was associated with bad luck and avoided by fishermen and the public alike. A report in 1936 covering a ferry encountering a “*wuji*” went:

As there was a ripple on the water’s surface, the fishes were moving their tails. The people on the ferries were all petrified, trying to dodge. Those timider even screamed, attracting hundreds of people watching the spectacle, who were all surprised and scared. Around ten minutes later, the few fishes dived down again and left. (“Hong Kong Discovered”)

The horror that the dolphin brought to people seems absurd today, where sighting a Chinese white dolphin is considered a joyous occasion. But in the past, people thought that the dolphin was a signal of an approaching typhoon, as explained in another news article in 1946 that went, “the dolphin usually dive under deep water, but they swim to the water surface because the water pressure down there is too low” (“*Wuji*”). Little did people know back then that the Chinese white dolphin is not a fish but a mammal that needs to surface to breathe. Nevertheless, the fishermen avoided the dolphins for a more practical reason, which is that they would follow the fish boats and eat the yield (Hung 90). The hostility towards the dolphins even led to an idiom that goes, “*wuji and baiji are so bad and should be avoided*” [烏忌白忌好棹忌] (“*Wuji*”).

Governor David Wilson (1987–1992) proposed to erect a new airport on Lantau Island in the late 1980s, during which local interest in the species was sparked (Liu and Hills 352). The construction required 1,200 hectares of land, and 75% of it had to be reclaimed, inevitably posing significant disruptions to the marine ecosystem (362). Before the plan was confirmed in 1989, green groups such as WWF-HK had already raised concerns over the project’s ecological impacts, saying that it might “threaten the habitat of 250 rare and endangered species of birds and wildlife, including the Chinese white dolphin” (Walker). During this period, green groups, namely WWF-HK and Friends of the

Earth, were continuously publicizing and heightening public visibility for the species, which marks the beginning of the instrumentalization of the dolphin as a proxy for conservation since the project's ecological impact was metonymically explained through its disruption towards the cetacean. Public awareness of the dolphin can be evidenced by a news article titled "Airport Work May Pose Threat to Endangered River Dolphins," published on August 2, 1992 (Griffin). The article focused on how the construction would negatively impact the dolphins, implying that the species is worth reporting and thus embodies great prominence. Such public awareness has held the officials accountable for conservation, where short-term conservation measures were taken in 1993, such as using a non-toxic seal bomb that temporarily moved the dolphins away from the construction area (Carter and Laxton). 1993 also marked the beginning of the government's HK\$2 million research project where the officials showed determination to study the species, reflected in the following quote: "New airport projects senior coordinator Kevin Shaw said the financing of the [research] project was imminent, and he promised if extra cash was needed, it would be found" (Carter and Laxton). The aroused awareness has since made the dolphin so publicly known, and publicly known enough to be used as a metaphor denoting scarcity. A piece of news in 1997 went, "Spare Sevens tickets might be as rare as the Chinese white dolphin this year" ("All Work"). In fact, the fame of the dolphins in 1997 was also attributable to the Handover, during which the species became an instrument for political messages.

Instrument for Politics: The "Clever, Cute, Kind, Active, and Inoffensive" Hong Kong People

In 1996, the Preparatory Committee for the HKSAR, which helped deal with issues related to the Handover, picked the Chinese white dolphin as the mascot for the event. Raymond Wu Wai-yung, the celebration sub-group convenor and later one of Hong Kong's delegates in Beijing's National People's Congresses (HKSAR Government, "Government Statement"), explained the Committee's decision:

"The dolphin is clever, cute, kind, active, and inoffensive. Exactly the character of Hong Kong," Mr. Wu said. He said there were four reasons for using the dolphin as a mascot. It reflected Hong Kong's history as a fishing port, and it travelled regularly to the Yangtze River, which symbolized the change of sovereignty. Mr. Wu said the Chinese white dolphin never slept—half of its brain kept functioning—representing the hard-working Hong Kong people.

Another reason was simply that its name included the word “Chinese,” he added. (K. No)

However, the account above does not show what Wu had initially said but a verified account that corrected Wu’s mistake. Wu first said that the dolphin would go back to the Yangtze River to lay eggs yearly (Chu), although Chinese white dolphins can only swim back to the Pearl River estuary, and they are mammals that do not lay eggs. In addition, far from being an “inoffensive” species, the dolphins sometimes “chase after others and bite their back,” leaving bite marks on their company when they play (Y. Lee). Equally misleading is to describe the dolphins as “never sleeping.” According to Dr. Jefferson (“Personal Interview”), unlike human beings, Chinese white dolphins have to remain conscious while “sleeping” since their evolution has not enabled them to breathe unconsciously. Thus, scientists prefer to call the sleeping-equivalent activity of the dolphins “resting.” Because of all the misinterpretation, Dr. Jefferson said that although he had taken a generally positive stance on the committee’s selection, he held some reservations:

I had mixed feelings about it because the fact that Chinese white dolphin was selected as the mascot for the Handover resulted in a lot of exposure of the public to the species. So, a lot more people learned about the dolphins and became concerned about their fate because of that. And for me, that would be a very positive thing for the conservation of the dolphins, but there was a lot of misinformation, misinterpretation, misunderstanding. And so, it also created some confusion about what was happening. (“Personal Interview”)

Another piece of misinformation that circulated among the public was that the dolphin was claimed to be extinct soon, which was and is not true (Choy 27; Jefferson 723). While it is undoubtedly valid to care about the Chinese white dolphin in Hong Kong because they are under different threats and disturbances, the dolphins in the Pearl River estuary, according to research published in 2012 “would not be in danger of extinction for about three generations (about 80 years), with the most likely scenario resulting in extinction more than 100 years in the future” (Huang et al., qtd. in Jefferson 723). However, this misinformation was greatly mobilized by citizens to express their reservations about choosing a precarious species to symbolize the future of Hong Kong, if not their pessimism towards the city (e.g., Choy 26–28; Holland). For instance, two quotes from a news article went,

It is a bit of a moot point. These dolphins are becoming extinct, as is our way of living in Hong Kong—but I honestly don't think they [the government] will make the connection.

Something which is bound to be extinct before the end of the century, something which is incredibly polluted, and probably sexually impotent. (Holland)

Thus, during the Handover, the Chinese white dolphin was used as an instrument to convey political messages, from both top-down and bottom-up, at the expense of the cetacean being claimed as an “egg-laying mammal” and “sexually impotent.”

Even Raymond Wu understood that the mascot could be quite ironic. To nevertheless defend the choice, Wu express that:

It is not doomed. On the contrary, the more protection people give it, the larger number there will be. (Holland)

It is a protected species that needs people's protection to survive, just like the One Country, Two Systems in Hong Kong. Both need protection. (Chan)

Whether the city has been doomed or boomed after the Handover is beyond the discussion of this article, but the Handover and the construction plan of the airport in the 1980s have surely laid the foundation for conservationists to narrate stories to build up the flagship species.

Instrument for Conservation: An Unsuccessful Flagship Species and Potential Negative Impacts

While the Chinese white dolphin in Hong Kong has come under numerous threats, including dolphin-watching activities, water pollution, and vessel collisions, stories of Chinese white dolphins, whether in newspapers or among NGOs' lobbying work, often orbit around the impacts of coastal developments and marine reclamation work, a major threat the Chinese white dolphin in Hong Kong is coming under (Lai et al. 260–262).

To build up the Chinese white dolphin as the flagship species, conservationists often hinge on the aesthetic allure and sociocultural meaning, such as their cuteness, public affection, and former role as the Handover mascot of the dolphin, to drum up response-ability (e.g., Cheung; K. Lee; M. Lee; Yip). Woo (“Personal Interview”) said WWF-

HK relied greatly on the two stories, and they have been persistently mentioning the two qualities during public outreach. In addition to the two stories, another narrative that WWF-HK has used is the ecological importance of the mammal—an apex predator in the food web—losing which would cause a great disturbance to ecology. Likewise, Ocean Park Conservation Foundation also shares this narrative on its website, saying that “They [the dolphins] play a critical role in maintaining the balance of marine ecology by controlling the number of other marine lives such as fish and squids.”

Hung Ka-yiu, the founder of HKDCS, acknowledges that he would use the dolphins as an “instrument” to promote environmental awareness (K. Lee). But besides cuteness, Hung proposes another moral imperative for the conservation of the species: They are the “indigenous inhabitants” (原居民) who deserve the right to live in the city and be protected (Hung 14). Echoing Hung is Vincent Ho, a HKDCS’s committee member, who told a beautiful story demonstrating the affection the dolphins have for Hong Kong and thus the need for conservation:

In fact, Chinese white dolphin have been trying very hard to live with us. Otherwise, in an environment where urban development has brought so much destruction, they would have gone elsewhere and would not have to stay here. (Ho qtd. in P. Lee)

The stories mentioned above pertain to appealing to people’s emotions (cuteness, menace, love for Hong Kong), morality (right to live, animal welfare), and concerns about ecology (important role in the food web). Little has been addressed in the main critique against ecological conservation in Hong Kong, which is the impacts on socio-economic development. In a city where economic growth and infrastructure development are deemed most paramount (Ng 9–10), conservationists have been countered by developers who have highlighted the socio-economic cost of protecting the dolphins. For instance, in 2001, business tycoon Gordon Wu Ying-sheung claimed that the container port in Hong Kong was progressing too slowly. He suggested developing a container port in the deep-water bay in northwest Lantau Island or west Tuen Mun. When questioned whether not the two sites overlapped with the habitat of the Chinese white dolphin, Wu responded “angrily” by saying, “Why does Hong Kong have to be a zoo? You have Chinese white dolphin, and thus you do not need ‘rice bowl’ [economic development, income, and jobs]?” (“Wu”).

To take the issue head-on, conservationists have attempted to publicize the dolphin's socio-economic values. In 2011, the Hong Kong Airport Authority planned to expand the airport by constructing the Three-runway System (3RW), meaning a 650-hectare reclamation work in northwest Lantau Island. The main justification of the expansion is that it is necessary to maintain Hong Kong as an international aviation hub, and the new runway would bring immense economic benefits ("The Value"). The EIA report was approved three years later amid controversy and fierce attacks from environmental NGOs. Since the reclamation site overlaps with the habitats of the dolphins, the flagship species was surely mobilized for resistance. This time, the socio-economic values of the mammal were brought up. In 2014, a group of NGOs published a research report showing that the "Social Return on Investment" of the Chinese white dolphin is worth HK\$3.61 billion annually⁴, considering how much extra time and money citizens would devote to dolphin conservation as well as the tourism revenue ("The Value"). Ascribing economic values to animals or nature for environmental lobbying is not unprecedented globally or in Hong Kong. The Australian Koala Foundation sheds light on how the animal brings AUD\$3.2 billion (~HK\$16.5 billion) in revenue and 30,000 jobs to the tourism industry per annum, with the hope of quantifying the necessity to implement a specific law on koala conservation. Civic Exchange, a Hong Kong public policy think tank, released a report in 2002, saying that Hong Kong's natural resources are valued at a minimum of HK\$1.8 billion to 6.5 billion annually, which policymakers should take into account when making decisions (Hopkinson and Stern 22). In that report, the two authors clarify that the intention of the research does not aim to monetize nature or to show that the values of nature "could be replaced by 6.5 billion dollars deposited in a bank account" but is a needed "intellectual exercise" since "we tend to value nature at zero dollars, forgetting the services and revenue nature provides" (1). The investigators clearly hold some reservations in their attempt to generate response-ability toward nature through the story berthing on monetization, and their reservation is later shared by HKDCS, one of the NGOs researching the "Social Return on Investment" of Chinese white dolphins. According to Chang ("Personal Interview"), the Society was struggling with whether the species should be absorbed into an "economic" and "commercial" discourse, given the fact that the conservation of nature is self-evidently important. However, they have "no choice" when the airport authority is using commercial justification

⁴ The coalition includes Friends of the Earth, HKDCS, the Professional Commons, and the New Economic Foundation, a British think tank ("The Value").

to legitimize their constructions.⁵ Tying the necessity of conservation with economic values might seem morally ambivalent in the idealistic sense that animals should be entitled to the right to be free from exploitation of any sort. However, after considering how capitalism is characteristic of Hong Kong's ideology (Ng 9–11), the monetization of the Chinese white dolphin seems to be a sensible tactic and story to generate response-ability.

Unfortunately, with all the environmental lobbying in the name of and for the Chinese white dolphin, the 3RW project has still proceeded regardless. This example is just one of the many failures of the environmental lobbying campaigns that use the Chinese white dolphin as the flagship species to resist development. Only once, in 2007, did concerted efforts by NGOs lead to the withdrawal of a development plan. The plan was proposed by CLP Power, who had decided to build a liquefied natural gas terminal in Tai A Chau, part of the Soko Islands group that the dolphins frequent. Research conducted by four local universities showed that more than 52% of citizens opposed the plan, with only 13% supporting it ("More Than"). However, with another power provider, HK Electric, CLP Power has managed to build the station later at the same place, which began operation in 2023. The main legitimization of the station was paradoxically also environmental, since "increasing the usage of natural gas could reduce the reliance on coal in power generation." When asked about the efficacy of the flagship species, Chang goes,

When we talk about the situations where development projects are implemented in areas where the dolphins live, whether the dolphins [as a symbol or flagship species] can hinder the development..... With our observation these ten years, the symbol is very weak. Even for places that we have proven to be important areas for many Chinese white dolphin, development projects were carried out. The Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macau Bridge and the Third Runway are two very precise examples [...] During the construction, the number of Chinese white dolphin dropped drastically and was publicized by media, but the development can never be stopped. ("Personal Interview")

He further professed his frustration and asserted the ineffectiveness of the flagship species by saying:

⁵ Besides the values of the dolphins, the NGO coalition report predicted that the cost of the carbon emission of the construction would reach 640 billion Hong Kong dollars ("The Value").

I think and can only say that for general citizens, Chinese white dolphin is received “positively” in perception, image, and status. But even if there is something that you like, you might not think deeply and take the initiative to protect them. (“Personal Interview”)

While some of the mentioned research findings do show Hong Kong people’s concerns and awareness about the dolphins, as exemplified by concessions citizens are prepared to make for conservation and opposition to the natural gas terminal, Chang acknowledged that narratives surrounding Chinese white dolphins have not yet crystallized effective protection for the flagship species and resistance to the ecologically disastrous projects that impact the dolphins. The discrepancy can be conceptualized as a “defective response-ability,” where many among the public “respond,” although the responses might not have materialized in responsible actions that ensure the well-being of the dolphins. This gap might explain the dwindled abundance of the cetacean in Hong Kong, from 188 in 2003 to 34 in 2022, shrinking to less than one-quarter of the original count.

In addition, the response-ability towards the Chinese white dolphin might even be paradoxical to environmental protection, especially when it comes to responses that are strategically directed to the ecological problems the flagship species metonymically refer to. In numerous instances, the paradox is crystalized when pro-development groups rationalize their destructive projects by showing the absence of the dolphins in specific sites, turning the cetacean into a double-sided sword for conservation. The undercurrent for such kind of justification pertains to a major critique towards using flagship species as a proxy for conservation (Schlagloth et al. 130), since in some stories the dolphins are equated as the only entity deserving environmental protection, creating a misleading perception that places without the cetacean are almost “unnecessary” to conserve. As mentioned, the Chinese white dolphin has assumed the role of flagship species since the 1980s amid the airport construction. Their endearing qualities and socio-cultural resonance have been mobilized to dramatize and capitalize on metonymically representing the ecological impacts brought by mega development projects, including the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macau Bridge and its border-crossing facility, the liquefied natural gas terminal in south Lantau Island, and the 3RW of the Hong Kong International Airport, to name just a few examples. However, since the dolphins do not inhabit all the waters, some development projects that involve reclamation have used their absence as a pretext for legitimization. For instance, when the government was considering

city-wide reclamation to boost land supply in 2010, they believed that the projects would not be too controversial since “it is not like ‘there are Chinese white dolphins everywhere’” (不是「區區有中華白海豚」) (“Carrying”). The non-existence of the dolphins is also deeply ingrained in the legitimization of the Lantau Tomorrow Vision Project proposed in 2018, a massive 1700-hectare reclamation project of artificial islands in east Lantau Island where the Chinese white dolphin has not been found active in ⁶. Banker and pro-establishment politician Stephen Wong is one of the many who support the Project by defending that the reclamation site “does not overlap with the main habitat [of the dolphin]” (see also, “Supporting”; “Tomorrow”). Those who oppose the Project, such as a coalition of nine environmental NGOs, issued an opposing statement, citing irreversible ecological damage imposed by the reclamation work, namely the destruction of nests of the China-protected White-bellied Sea Eagle (*Ichthyophaga leucogaster*) and habitat of the endemic Hong Kong Newt (*Paramesotriton hongkongensis*) (Greenpeace), although little is known about these animals among the public. When asked whether the Chinese white dolphin, as a flagship species, could be a double-sided sword that hinders conservation, especially on the skewed reliance on the dolphins as the main resisting symbol against ecologically degrading practices, Woo (“Personal Interview”) from WWF-HK explained frustratingly that NGOs in Hong Kong lack resources and have to rely on a flagship species to resist different development projects. In many cases, the Chinese white dolphin in Hong Kong is also an “umbrella species,” meaning that “the area or configuration of areas occupied by the population of one species is used as a shortcut to designate where viable populations of other background species occur” (Caro 99). In Woo’s (“Personal Interview”) words, focusing on the Chinese white dolphin can lead to “one who saves all” (一個救全家), and thus the stories of Chinese white dolphins have been perseveringly told by different conservationists for the sake of instrumentalizing the cetacean as a proxy for conservation.

⁶ The project was proposed in 2018 but faced great opposition from the civil sphere, citing ecological disaster and high cost. In 2022, the government estimated that the cost would be HK\$580 billion (Lin). In 2024, Paul Chan, the financial secretary, said that the project would be “delayed but will go ahead.” (J. Lee)

Conclusion

This article examines pivotal moments when the Chinese white dolphin rose to prominence in Hong Kong—specifically, during the construction of Hong Kong International Airport and the Handover—and how conservationists have emphasized the dolphin’s multifaceted importance in fostering response-ability. The exploration shows that response-ability to Chinese white dolphins might have translated into “response” and concerns over the dolphins but has surely not translated into sufficient successful resistance against developers’ ecologically disastrous construction plans and other protection measures that ensure their abundance in Hong Kong waters. Choosing the Chinese white dolphin as a flagship species might also be a double-sided sword for the city’s conservation, given their absence has been used as a pretext for ecologically disruptive developments, although relying on the flagship species seems necessary in light of the lack of resources among environmental NGOs.

After the Handover, the tendency for people to read their misery into the Chinese white dolphin had been scarce, although there has been a resurgence after a series of political events unveiled by the 2019 Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement, the largest series of demonstrations in the history of Hong Kong. In that year, one social media post depicted that only 32 dolphins were left in Hong Kong because of all the hardship the species is coming under. One comment went, “you think a country that does not care about human rights would care about animals?”¹ In 2020, in a post about how the dolphins could no longer “endure” Hong Kong because of all the threats, a person commented, “it kind of makes sense to use the Chinese white dolphin as the mascot of the Handover.”² That year marks Beijing’s promulgation of the National Security Law, under which many pro-democracy parties disbanded and politicians were arrested. In 2021, when an ecological photographer was asked to choose an animal to represent Hong Kong people, he went,

Chinese white dolphin. It is suppressed, such as by reclamation projects, and the HKZMB [Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macau Bridge] construction. When these things are right at the corner, you either leave or stay. Those who stay must have prepared to suffer. (Tam)

Whether or not the alliance of both suffering human and non-human animals—or, in Adams’s (6) words, “point of intersection”—can generate response-ability is an issue worth investigating for the sake of

environmental lobbying, and future research should be critical about whether the affective attunements could contribute to more responsibility or whether the dolphins have been devalued only into an instrument for people to profess their emotions. At the end of the day, as Una Chaudhuri's (4) reminder goes, "Animals are not a metaphor."

Notes

1. The references have been intentionally omitted due to considerations of political sensitivity.
2. Same as above.

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