
A factual account of an incident involving porpoises

By E.C.S. Turpin (Charlotteville, Tobago)

THE date of my encounter with the five porpoises has slipped my memory, but an account of the incident written by Mr. Andrew Hewkin, an English artist, staying with us in Charlotteville, and published in the *Trinidad Guardian*, should supply it*

About ten thirty one morning, my wife came and told me that there were some porpoises caught in a sein net being pulled in at the lower end of the beach.

I went to have a look, and spotted four fins circling around within the arc of floats farthest from the shore. It did not really worry me at the time, as the net still had a long way to come in and since the animals were not entangled, and knowing their high intelligence rating, I assumed that they would just slip over the float line when they were good and ready. I went back to my work.

My mother soon called me to say that the porpoises were still there and that the net was coming in quite fast since there were a lot more people pulling in the net now than when I had last looked. At that moment, the fisherman who owned the sein came hurrying down the beach towards the crowd; my mother asked him please not to harm the porpoises. He replied with a laugh that they would probably jump out, but that anyway, he had heard that they were good to eat.

I realised then that it was time to do something, but what? To appeal to the fishermen would be a waste of time. To try to cut the net would be looking for trouble, but I HAD to do something . . . and fast!!

I downed a slug of rum for courage, put on mask and snorkel and swam towards the end of the sein amid loud shouts from the beach.

The water was murky, for we had had quite a bit of rain, and I could barely make out the mesh of the net reaching down into the gloom on my left. I swam as fast as I could towards the bag of the sein.

Having no idea of what fish might also be within the net, I said a little prayer and kept going. Just before I came to the end of the sein, the water cleared up a bit and I could make out a porpoise swimming in circles near the narrowing apex of the enclosing floats. There was no fish in the net. The encircling of the porpoises had been deliberate.

Grabbing hold of the float line, I hung on, trying to think what to do next. The shouting from the beach had reached quite a pitch at this point, and more people were coming to see what it was all about.

I attempted to push down on the line of floats but they were too buoyant to sink over a long enough stretch to do any good. What should I do, climb over and try to "shoo" them out? I thought that would also be asking for trouble, more than likely "legal", as I would then have "broken into", as it were, the sein net.

In desperation, I took my snorkel out of my mouth and began to whistle . . . little short high pitched notes while at the same time snapping my fingers under water. That should attract them if nothing else, and make them aware of someone outside their prison.

The first porpoise swam up and stopped just on the other side of the line of the net, right opposite me. For a while we looked at each other across one foot of water and a line of bubbling rubber floats, until, pulling myself together, I reached over and gently put my hand on the narrowest part of his body just above the tail flukes. His body was warm and firm, and I could feel him trembling as though afraid, as he most certainly must have been, as my hand was most likely the first human hand he had ever felt . . . but he did not move.

"O.K." I said to myself, "let's go", and as quickly and as gently as I could, I slid my other hand under his belly and pulled him backwards over the floats and over myself. He shot off a little way and stopping, stuck his head out of the water and began whistling and squeaking.

I turned back to the net, and number two was lined up waiting for me. Realising what was expected of me now, I got the other three over the floats in record time.

I left the net then, and swam towards my little group who seemed reluctant to leave the area. They let me swim right up to them but when I tried to shoo them off into deeper water, they slipped around me and re-grouped just outside the floats of the net, all four with their heads out of the water whistling away at me. I was getting cold by this time, so I turned away from them and started back to shore.

I had not swum two strokes when I turned around and went back. I had suddenly decided to dive down and look at the bottom of the net. The lead line of the net was on the bottom by this time, the depth of water being about twenty-five feet (8 m.). On my first dive I saw him.

He was hopelessly entangled in the sein, desperately trying to bite his way through and bleeding from two deep rope cuts just behind the blowhole. I popped up for air, saw the beach forty feet away and went back down.

From the outside I pushed and fought to untangle the porpoise, for I knew that he would soon drown if I couldn't get him to the surface quickly. I came up, and went down again. This time I got him free. He shot off towards the beach. Unluckily for him, the people on the beach let out such a roar when they saw him break surface and arrow towards them, that the noise scared him into wheeling around and ramming into the net again just below me. Once more I dived down and released him.

An unbelievable din had arisen from the combination of the whistling of the other porpoises and the shouts of the crowd. He came up to the float line and stopped. He seemed larger than the others. No sooner had I touched him than off he went, made a circuit and returned. Poor animal, he was hurt, nearly drowned and scared to death, and his friends outside were telling him to stay still and let some weird creature grab him and pull him over

* The incident reported here happened 3 or 4 years ago and this account was written for the club's journal at the president's request. Unfortunately the exact date cannot be remembered nor can sufficient detail of the porpoises be recalled to allow a tentative identification of the species. — Ed.

the net backwards. But he stayed this time.

As soon as he was clear of the net, the others formed around him, one on either side to help him keep his blow hole out of the water and the others swimming slowly around the three. I joined the group, and together the six of us made our way slowly into deeper water. They were reluctant to go out, and I had to chivvy them along. Looking back now, I realise that carrying their wounded and bleeding companion, they wished to stay in shallow water as long as possible where there was a less likely chance of sharks. My one thought however was to get them out of range of the seine, which the fishermen were speedily re-folding on to the boat. I got them out as far as I could and came home.

The main story is now completed, except that about fifteen minutes later, the group were back, close enough for the fishermen to have another go, and the boat started off after them again.

Andrew Hewkin and I quickly launched my little rowing

boat and cutting between the seine boat and the porpoises, succeeded eventually in steering them out again into deeper water. They had no fear of us in the boat and both of us from time to time had to lean over the side and tap them on the back or dorsal fin to keep them on the move.

We followed them up and down for about an hour. During this time, we noticed them diving for longer and longer periods as the injured one recovered. Eventually we lost them for about fifteen minutes, saw them once more towards the middle of the bay, figured they were now well on their way and came home.

Needless to say I was not very popular for a while, but time heals all wounds and everyone is friendly again. However, what I, or rather the porpoises and I did, could not be done again, as it only succeeded by virtue of its complete improbability. No one would let me get near their net a second time.

The only hope for porpoises is for Trinidad and Tobago to join the list of countries that enforce legislation protecting them within territorial waters, and that's up to you and me, isn't it?