Taiwan uses biotech to safeguard whales and dolphins

August 27 2013

Picture of a dolphin at the Marineland animal exhibition park on December 19, 2012 in Antibes, southeastern France. Taiwan has started using advanced biotechnology to protect endangered whales and dolphins against poachers, supplementing existing DNA testing, officials said Tuesday.

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A newly developed government-financed litmus test will show within minutes whether meat samples seized from poachers are whale or dolphin meat, Council of Agriculture officials said.

Poachers previously tried to avoid prosecution by cutting the heads off dolphins or whales which they caught.

Three years ago the council began using DNA tests to identify the meat, but results took five days to arrive.

"Now it needs only 10 minutes to verify any samples," Kuan Li-hao, an official from the council's forestry bureau, told AFP.

The litmus paper is designed to be activated by the unique structure of a protein in whales and dolphins, said Yang Wei-cheng, an associate professor of Taiwan's National Chiayi University who heads the research team.

More than 30 officials from the customs, coastguard and other government bodies attended a training session in Taipei Tuesday on the new detection method.

Around 100 more officials will take the training course by September 5, Kuan said.

All species of whales and dolphins have been protected by Taiwan's conservation law since 1989.

Violators face a prison term of up to five years and a fine of up to 1.5 million Taiwan dollars (US$50,000).

While poaching continues, the council said the number of offences was declining.