

Workshop on the Biology and Conservation of Cetaceans in South Asia

Marine and freshwater environments in Asia support the greatest number of cetacean species threatened with extinction. In recent years substantial progress has been made on reviewing the biology of cetaceans in Southeast Asia and on developing recommendations and priorities for their conservation (Perrin *et al.* 1996; 2005). Similar progress has also been made on reviewing the biology and conservation of freshwater cetaceans in Asia (Reeves *et al.* 1993; Reeves and Leatherwood 1995; Smith and Reeves 2000; Smith *et al.* 2007). A fundamental gap in the information needed for conserving Asian cetaceans is the general lack of attention that has been given to reviewing the biology and developing conservation recommendations for marine species in South Asia.

In 2004-2005, the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS), Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) and Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society (WDCS) sponsored a project to Conduct Training Courses for South Asian Scientists and an Assessment of Coastal Cetacean Populations in the Bay of Bengal. This project gave intensive training and field experience to a core group of scientists from Bangladesh, India, Myanmar and Sri Lanka, and resulted in population and bycatch assessments of cetaceans along the entire coast of Bangladesh and in the Mergui Archipelago of Myanmar. Meanwhile in the Arabian Sea, a variety of projects has produced substantial new information about cetaceans in Iran, Pakistan and the Maldives. However, due to the lack of mechanisms encouraging regional collaboration, efforts have been ad hoc and coordination has been difficult

The Workshop on the Biology and Conservation of Cetaceans in South Asia proposes to bring together scientists to review recent progress and establish research and conservation priorities for cetaceans in South Asia, and to involve high-level government officials with developing a Regional Agreement on the Conservation of Cetacean in South Asia under the auspices of CMS. The idea would be to convene a three-day scientific workshop with 2-3 representatives from each South Asia nation (Bangladesh, India, Iran, Maldives, Myanmar, Pakistan and Sri Lanka), followed by a two-day meeting of high-level government officials from these same countries. A preliminary report of the scientific workshop would be presented to the officials at this meeting and a preliminary regional agreement would be drafted. A potential location for the workshop and meeting would be onboard a nature tourism vessel in the Sundarbans of Bangladesh. Convening the meeting in the Sundarbans would highlight the extensive cetacean work that has recently been conducted in Bangladesh (see Smith *et al.* 2006; Smith *et al.*, in press; Smith *et al.* in review) and the natural setting (with cetacean viewing opportunities) would be free from distractions and a desirable place for participants to visit.

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