



## YoD Newsletter 2007

### Our Dolphin of the Month November - the Amazon River Dolphin

All dolphins - from the largest, the orca, to the smallest species, Hector's dolphin - differ in many aspects. But in one way they are united: Their survival is threatened!

The United Nations have declared 2007 the Year of the Dolphin in the context of their environmental program UNEP, with the aim to develop a strategy for worldwide effective means of protection. In this initiative, the WDCS is an official founding partner of the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS), located in Bonn, Germany.



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We take the Year of the Dolphin 2007 as an opportunity to introduce a dolphin species to you each month. The dolphin of the month November is the Amazon River Dolphin, also known as pink river dolphin or Boto, the most famous among the river dolphins. Its name reflects its most exceptional trait: The pink coloration of this dolphin intensifies with increasing activity.

Dolphin of the month November: The pink river dolphin or Boto

With a length of 2,5 meter and a weight of 185 kg, it is the largest among all river dolphins and the most frequent as well. There are an estimated tens of thousands of individuals existing within the range of this species. Unfortunately, this does not mean all's clear.

Where does the Boto live and how does it behave?

Pink river dolphins can be found only in fresh water of the Amazon and Orinoco in Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela. Cataracts, chutes, power plants, dams and fluctuating water levels limit their habitat. Rainy season and dry period alter the water line about 14 meters each year. That's why Botos sometimes are found swimming literally "in the forest". Furthermore, the distribution of the dolphins depends on the migration of their preferred prey fish.

Pink river dolphins are slow swimmers and have been observed surfing the waves of slow ships. Early morning and late afternoon are their high times of activity, cutting through the surface or doing small leaps. Usually living in small groups they can sometimes be seen isolated. The time of birth is between May and June when the water levels are high but sinking, which results in an increasing concentration of prey.

There are three subspecies, which are geographically isolated from each other: *Inia geoffrensis* / *humboldtiana* / *boliviensis*.

Tales about the quick-change artist

Their ability to change their body color and swim upside down has created the legend that they have the ability to transform into a man at night and seduce women and girls. There are fairy tales that dolphins bewitched humans in ancient times to take them to an enchanted paradisiacal place under water.

Pink river dolphins are endangered

The greatest peril for these dolphins are man-made changes to the biotope which are: degradation of the habitat, dykes and dams, pollution of the water and drowning in fishing nets. Some people view the dolphins as holy animals, in other areas they are seen as competitors and chased by fishermen.

#### Protection by international conventions

The Convention on Migratory Species in Bonn (CMS) lists the Boto in Annex II. All CMS member states are thus committed to take measures for protecting the dolphins from the perils mentioned before. The IUCN, the International Union for Conservation of Nature, classifies the Boto as "Endangered".

#### WDCS - Projects

The WDCS is financially supporting a project to assess the number of dolphins in the large rivers of the South American Andean countries. The project of the Omacha Foundation is unique worldwide and is providing important information about the populations. The project supervisor, Fernando Trujillo, was awarded the "Whitley Conservation Prize" for his commitment to the protection of the Botos.

The foundation under Trujillo's leadership runs a field station on the banks of the river Loreto Yacuy (Amazon), backed by the WDCS. Children and teachers from local schools and students from all over the country have been coming in order to learn about the dolphins and their ecosystem. The teaching about the dolphins, other wild animals and the conservation of nature is in the focus of the project. Posters, flyers and leaflets are distributed to municipalities along the river. The Omacha Foundation conducts a program for conservation and management, a reserve located at the Orinoco and called "Bojonawi" (the Sikuani word for "Giant Otter"). The rivers of the Amazon basin are the habitat of many key species and Fernando Trujillo expands his work to include the protection of the Giant Otter, the Caymans, the Anacondas and many other species.

#### Fernando Trujillo speaking about his work:

"The WDCS has been supporting our effort to protect the Botos for 17 years and helped us to achieve all the positive results up to now. I started the project in the middle of the 1980ies. I was studying marine biology at that time and was very fond of large predators like dolphins, sharks et cetera. I was not certain what to do with my enthusiasm before I met Jacques Cousteau, the famous Marine Biologist. He was the first to tell me about river dolphins in the Amazon but he added: "The problem is that we do not know very much about these animals."

I think I was motivated mainly by the idea to do research on the relationship between the dolphins of the Amazon and the indigenous peoples living there. The dolphins are the ambassadors of the rivers. By protecting them we can improve the management of these biotopes. Protection of the Botos means improving the regulation of fishing, fighting pollution with mercury, stopping rainforest deforestation and reevaluating gigantic projects like a reservoir dam."

There were also a number of important events related to Dolphin Conservation in the last weeks. Though these are not directly part of the YoD campaign, we would still like to highlight them in our newsletter.

#### Foundation Laid for One of the Largest Agreements on Small Whales under CMS

Adeje, Tenerife/Spain, 20 October - During the West African Talks on Cetaceans and Their Habitats (WATCH), held from 16 – 20 in Tenerife, Spain, the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS) has created the framework for a major agreement on small cetaceans under its umbrella.

The agreement area stretches from Morocco to South Africa, and covers the waters rich in whales around the Macaronesia Islands in the Eastern Atlantic. A specific declaration on cetaceans in the archipelagos, developed by the Macaronesia group, was endorsed by the plenary during the meeting.

CMS Executive Secretary Robert Hepworth said: "After the conclusion of the agreement on cetaceans in the South Pacific in September 2006, this is another milestone in the conservation of dolphins and small whales across an extended range. It is a tangible achievement of the Year of the Dolphin with support from Spain and in particular Canary Islands, the range states, donors, UNESCO, NGOs and the scientific community. WDCS and the travel group TUI, both founding partners of the Year of the Dolphin provided scientific expertise and respectively logistic support, thus contributing to this success story."

A preliminary text of the agreement was developed and discussed during the meeting. In working groups, delegates also elaborated and improved draft Action Plans for Small Whales and for Manatees under the agreement. The Action Plans provides for regional and international collaboration with an ecosystem approach as well as legislation and policy to implement conservation. Reducing bycatch and the impact of fisheries will be crucial components of the Action Plan. Eventually, limited

hunting should lead to a recovery of populations of these marine mammals.

The CMS Secretariat will now submit revised texts of the agreement and the Action Plans to all range states. The objective is a follow up meeting in 2008 to conclude the new agreement and its twin action plans. There was a common understanding between delegates that a Memorandum of Understanding on the Conservation of Small Cetaceans and Manatees of Western Africa and Macaronesia had to be swiftly finalized under the auspices of CMS.

Up to 100 delegates attended the WATCH scientific and negotiating sessions with scientists and regulators/authorities, in particular from West Africa, Spain and Portugal with the Azores and Madeira. Results of latest / most recent scientific findings as well as in-depth information exchange between leading marine biologists triggered a new round in international cetacean conservation policy.

#### New Responses to Whales and Dolphins in Need: Towards Reducing Underwater Noise, Ship Strikes and By-catch in Marine Protected Areas

Dubrovnik / Croatia, 25 October – The reduction of threats and the establishment of new marine protected areas were concluded to improve the conservation status of whales and dolphins in the Black and Mediterranean Seas. These resolutions were adopted at the Third Meeting of the Parties to the Agreement on the Conservation of Cetaceans in the Black and Mediterranean Seas (ACCOBAMS) hosted by Croatia in Dubrovnik, 22-25 October 2007.

More than 80 delegates, among them representatives of 21 Parties to the Agreement, NGOs, scientific institutions and many observers attended the meeting to discuss and endorse strategies for cetacean conservation in the Agreement area.

Ana Štrbenac, State Institute for Nature Conservation of Croatia and Chair of the Meeting said: "Establishing marine protected areas is an indispensable tool against habitat degradation. Croatia has preventively protected the marine area around the islands of Cres and Losinj as a special marine reserve. Authorities and local communities will collaborate in the management of marine protected areas."

Whales and Dolphins are particularly vulnerable to human-induced threats. As such they are good biological indicators of their ecosystems. Designing a marine protected area would not only help to protect a cetacean species, but also other species living in the same ecosystem. Such an ecosystem approach assesses the nature and scale of the trophic interactions in the marine environment. As marine predators migrate long distances, marine protected areas must be restored. Due to their mobility, cetaceans have too large a range to be encompassed by a single protected area. Networks of marine protected areas need to be established to protect critical habitat and migration corridors of whales and dolphins. 18 new marine protected areas are planned. Black Sea cetaceans will find protected areas in Russian, Ukrainian and Georgian and the Sperm Whale in Greek waters. In addition, the Alborán Sea, the Straits of Gibraltar and Sicily, being the most diverse cetacean habitat in the ACCOBAMS region, were recommended as areas of special importance for various cetacean species.

Transboundary protection is also necessary to prevent threats that are not restricted to national boundaries. Noise levels in the world's seas have risen considerably due to commercial shipping, oil and gas exploration, military sonar and other man made causes. Noise can travel up to thousands of kilometres and disrupt the orientation of marine mammals. Parties are now committed to regulate and reduce underwater noise which requires specific laws. Together with authorities of marine protected areas they need to work with the International Maritime Organization (IMO) and shipping industries to reroute shipping lanes.

The collision of large whales with vessels poses a serious threat to the marine mammals. Fin and sperm whales are particularly threatened by impacts with vessels. Speed is a crucial factor. As a result, Spain decided to reduce the speed of vessels in areas of special importance in the Strait of Gibraltar. Dedicated observers and trained vessel crews can help to alert captains on the presence of whales. A steering group will be created to work with the ACCOBAMS Secretariat, the Parties to the Agreement, the PELAGOS Sanctuary, the International Whaling Commission (IWC), IMO and the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS) to address ship strikes on large whales in the Mediterranean.

Fisheries among others are the cause for a dramatic decline of Black Sea cetaceans. Now parties adopted a plan to restore their populations until 2010 as an immediate measure. Scientific information for a long term conservation plan will include the completion of the basin-wide survey. A by-catch network as part of a regional stranding network and new marine protected areas would be part of this

strategy. Fisheries continue to threaten the existence of the once abundant Common Dolphin in the Mediterranean. Giuseppe Notarbartolo di Sciara, Chair of the Scientific Committee, warned against the consequences: "Only a few scattered populations remain in the Mediterranean. I call upon governments to implement existing conservation measures. Otherwise the Common Dolphin might be extinct in the Eastern Ionian Sea as early as 2010."

Live stranding of cetaceans is an alarming phenomenon calling for a rescue network in the entire Agreement area. Rescue activities are to be reported to a comprehensive database to improve knowledge on populations and migrations. By extracting valuable information from live strandings and post mortems, expert veterinarians can contribute to an ACCOBAMS rescue network. In order to facilitate the process, the Scientific Committee suggested constituting an international task force to address marine mammal mortality. A multi-disciplinary approach among various experts will give data on epidemics, pollution and ecology. Mass strandings and disaster scenarios involving oil or chemical spills will be addressed separately. Training of the emergency task forces will enhance efficiency and ensure positive long-term results. Starting with a Mediterranean database the ultimate objective is to establish a similar instrument for the Black Sea. Dolphins are also increasingly threatened by direct taking from the wild to be used in Dolphin Assisted Therapy. Delegates disapproved unanimously of this practice, as there is no scientific evidence of therapeutical effects.

ACCOBAMS Executive Secretary Marie Christine Grillo-Van Klaveren concluded: "The new assessment of threats posed to cetaceans has led to the adoption of crucial resolutions to provide for a more comprehensive cooperation between governments, fisheries, international organizations, scientific experts of various disciplines and NGOs to design appropriate conservation instruments. One year after the declaration of the Year of the Dolphin we have made a significant step forwards. For ACCOBAMS and its parent convention CMS, the implementation of the Agreement will be a major contribution towards fulfilling our mandate: to reduce the loss of biodiversity by 2010."

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