



## The Ganges River Dolphin or Susu

### Dolphins in Rivers

River Dolphins inhabit some of the largest and muddiest river systems of Asia and South America. The animals rely strongly on their echolocation-system in order to navigate and forage in the turbid water – some of them are even almost blind! Their habitat is massively influenced by industrial development (Dams, energy plants, boat traffic), and as a consequence these dolphins are threatened throughout their range. Among the many threats they face are pollution, hunting, overfishing, noise pollution (as they rely on sound strongly), entanglement in fishing gear and habitat fragmentation, e.g. by dam construction.



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Where does the Ganges Dolphin live and how many are there left?

Ganges River Dolphins are found in the river systems of the Ganges, the Meghna and the Brahmaputra in western India, Nepal, and Bhutan as well as in the Karnaphuli in Bangladesh. Only an estimated 100 animals survive in Nepal. The total population is thought to be between 2000 and 4000 individuals. Given a yearly decline of 60-100 animals, the population has been decimated by about 30% during the last 10 years. Ganges River Dolphins inhabit exclusively freshwater and prefer deeper, slow-moving waters. During flooding and high water levels, they can be found outside the riverbed or in small side arms, respectively. They live a largely solitary life.

The Ganges Dolphin: what does it look like?

Ganges Dolphins exhibit a uniform grey brownish coloration. Their body is stout with an arched belly, the forehead is pronounced and leads into a long, thin snout. The animals grow to a size of 2-2,5 metres, with females slightly bigger and longsnoutier than males. Their pectoral fins are broad and rudderlike, and instead of a dorsal fin, they have a small, triangular hump on their lower back. Besides the Indus Dolphin, they are the only cetaceans lacking an eye lens, relying heavily on their sonar. These two species were long viewed as identical, but are really two separate subspecies.

Protection under international agreements

The Convention on Migratory Species (CMS) lists the Ganges Dolphin in Annex II. This obliges CMS parties to undertake efforts for the protection of the animals and against threats. IUCN, the World Conservation Union, consider the Ganges Dolphin as an endangered species.

The WDCS has been supporting the work of Dr. Sunil Chaudhary for several years now. Read more about his fascination for Ganges Dolphins...

“You can call me a Conservation Biologist, or better a Naturalist because I love nature and all the different components of nature.

My early days spent in Netarhat, in what was then Bihar and now Jharkhand, in a rural environment at the altitude of 4000 feet surrounded by the most exquisite jungle scenery, probably sowed the seeds of nature care in me early in my

childhood.

My research problem for Ph.D. program was pollution studies of River Ganges near Bhagalpur. In the course of my Ph.D. work, I used to visit my working site, i.e. 38 km of river segment near Bhagalpur, every month. After collecting water samples from sampling stations and analysing some water quality parameters on the spot, I often sat on the riverbank and observed the flowing river, people crossing the river on boat, fishermen fishing in the river and Ganges river dolphins surfacing for split seconds. It reminded me of my childhood days when I used to go to my native village for vacations by crossing over the river by motorized vessels, often seeing the dolphins surfacing. At that time, I did not know that this charismatic animal was a river dolphin or a freshwater cetacean species. I knew them only by the name 'soons' – animals in the River Ganges that might harm human beings.

Later, when I had been teaching at Bhagalpur University, I conducted several minor and major projects and attended a series of seminars, symposia & workshops on wildlife conservation and environmental education, but the workshop on 'River Biodiversity in South Asia', organized by WDCS and Patna University Zoology Department in April 1998, changed my academic and professional life altogether. Mr. Brian D. Smith, Member IUCN/Cetacean Specialist Group was present in the workshop and we had a long conversation on the threats to the biodiversity of the River Ganges including the dolphins, and also about the possible conservation measures to protect the threatened aquatic wildlife in the river. Brian motivated me to take up this challenge in Vikramshila Gangetic Dolphin Sanctuary (VGDS), the only protected area for the protection of the highly endangered Ganges river dolphins *Platanista gangetica gangetica*. Initially I was reluctant to take up this challenge because I knew nothing about freshwater cetaceans.

When back to Bhagalpur, I had a meeting with my working group members and we realized that we belong to the region bathed by River Ganges, - the cultural, spiritual and ecological symbol of India, and that we therefore have an obligation to conserve the river and its rich biodiversity including dolphins. We also realized that the time had come now for giving back to the society and considering our own obligations to future generations. As a result, Vikramshila Biodiversity research & Education Center (VBREC) was born. Since its inception in December 1998, VBREC has established itself as the focal organization for research and education activities on the conservation of Ganges river dolphins and other wildlife in VGDS. For the purpose, we received logistic and financial support from Whale & Dolphin Conservation Society, UK.

#### Our Research & Education programs in VGDS

We implemented a systematic program to monitor the abundance and habitat of dolphins and made observations on the status of riverine birds and other fauna.

We conducted regulatory surveys for assessing threats from wildlife hunting and destructive fishing practices, educating fishermen on government regulations regarding the use of bio-resources in the Sanctuary, rescuing wildlife found in the possession of fishermen or captured in illegal gears used by poachers and inhibiting illegal activities by our presence on the river.

We educated govt. officials and lobbied them to restore civil control and enforce fishing and wildlife regulation.

We strengthened community outreach and awareness activities with mass meetings and street theatre performances on conserving dolphins and protecting fishermen.

We wrote a script and filmed a video documentary on conservation issues and activities in the Sanctuary.

We mobilized student volunteers in Bhagalpur to become involved in wildlife research and education activities.

We developed an independently functioning research team and established Vikramshila Biodiversity Research & Education Center (VBREC) in the University Department of Botany of T.M.Bhagalpur University. The goals of the Center are to advance the conservation prospects of *Platanista* dolphins and other biodiversity, and to secure sustainable livelihood for local people depending on aquatic and riparian resources of the Sanctuary.

We intervened in the State of Bihar High Court proceedings regarding state and national governments involvement in the management of the Sanctuary to ensure that the measures taken provide effective protection for the dolphins and other wildlife.

We presented a paper on our research and education activities in VGDS, "Vikramshila Gangetic Dolphin Sanctuary: Turning Conventional Wisdom on the Head" at International Symposium on "New Currents in Conserving Freshwater Systems" at New York in 2005, organized by Centre for Biodiversity Conservation and American Museum of Natural History, U.S.A.

We published a paper, "Conservation and Biomonitoring in Vikramshila Gangetic Dolphin sanctuary, Bihar, India", in the peer reviewed journal, ORYX in April 2006.

We have accomplished some of the objectives in last 6-years of the project implementation, and it has yielded encouraging results. Due to VBREC's sustained conservation initiatives in VGDS, the number of dolphins has increased from 95± in 1998 to 150± now, i.e. 2006. But still many more objectives have to be accomplished. VBREC is committed to work with WDCS for developing and implementing an appropriate conservation mechanism in the Vikramshila Sanctuary. This requires further continuation of the project and funding from WDCS.

#### Present Threats in Vikramshila

These river dolphins face many threats including competition with humans for food and shrinking water resources, physical alteration, degradation and loss of habitats, deliberate killing for dolphin products such as meat and oil, and collision with powered vessels. Platanista dolphins are also threatened by the enormous pollutant load of the river, and by destructive fishing activities, which results in high mortality from by-catch (accidental entanglement in fishing gears), and reduced availability of prey. Vikramshila fishermen community is presently caught in the dragnet of conservation. They are facing a strange predicament. On one hand, the Provincial Govt. has banned all fishing activities in the Sanctuary, and on the other hand, illegal fishing by antisocial / rich contractors and the fish mafia continues. The poor traditional fishermen are arrested on the pretext of violation of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, when they go for subsistence fishing in the river. As a result, conflict between the local fisher folk and regulatory authorities of the Sanctuary is growing. The fishermen community has started believing the Vikramshila Sanctuary as a threat to their livelihood. This is a very unfortunate situation. However, the local fisher folk still believe that they are the ones who can save the dolphins. They need fish to survive and so do the dolphins. If illegal fishing is banned in the river and they are allowed to do sustainable fishing, both dolphins and the fishermen will survive.

#### Road map for conserving Platanista dolphins in Vikramshila Sanctuary

The conservation target in the Vikramshila Sanctuary should be the sustainable co-management that means the active participation of local stakeholders, particularly traditional fishing community in regulatory decision making and management of the river segment within the Sanctuary limit (between Sultanganj and Kahalgaon) along with governmental agencies and VBREC.

Dr. Sunil Chaudhary, head of the Vikramshila Biodiversity Research and Education Centre (VBREC)

A new documentary on the Susu accompanies Prof. Ravindra Kumar Singh, who has been actively protecting Ganges River Dolphins for 25 years now, and explains how the current conflict between ecology and economy in its range might cost the Susu more than just clean habitat.  
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