

Ganges Dolphin declared National Aquatic Animal by Government of India: A Great Step Forward

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Recent news that the Indian Central Government, in the first meeting of the National Ganga River Basin Authority, chaired by the Hon. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, had decided to declare the Ganges dolphin, *Platanista gangetica gangetica*, as national aquatic animal was most welcome to cetacean specialists and enthusiasts and environmentalists generally. Not quite so welcome was the announcement of Environment Minister cum Central Zoo Authority Chair that the National Zoological Park (Delhi Zoo) would catch and exhibit the species in order to raise public awareness.

Both the species *Platanista gangetica* and the subspecies in the Ganga, *Platanista gangetica gangetica*, are listed by IUCN as Endangered. These listings were justified by the available estimates of population size, crude as they may be, and the fact that there are good reasons to suspect that the animals are being subjected to serious threats, particularly bycatch in fisheries, direct hunting in some parts of their range and habitat degradation. Better numerical information on status of the Ganges subspecies and indeed on the species overall (limited in range to the Indus, Ganga, Megna, Brahmaputra and Karnaphuli rivers of the South Asian subcontinent) is very much wanted and needed. *Platanista gangetica* is the sole surviving representative of its family, therefore its extinction would be seen as a greater loss than that of a species belonging to a more diverse mammalian family.

In the current Global Action Plan for Cetaceans prepared by the IUCN Cetacean Specialist Group, the section on live-captures for captive display and/or research reads as follows:

"Removal of live cetaceans from the wild, for captive display and/or research, is equivalent to incidental or deliberate killing, as the animals brought into captivity (or killed during capture operations) are no longer available to help maintain their natural populations." (See Appendix for whole section.)

No zoo or aquarium in the world has previously had any success with captive breeding of freshwater dolphins. There have been a few instances of individual animals living for years, and in some instances decades, but without systematic captive management resulting in sustainable populations, there is no justification for capture and removal of these animals from the wild. Sustainable captive populations would be a challenge even with multiple institutions and continental areas cooperating, as dolphins take several years to mature and can give birth to, at most, only one calf every two years. In other words, dolphins are biologically constrained to reproduce very slowly, unlike many other mammal species that are kept in zoos and aquariums.

Of course, just because no zoo or aquarium has previously managed to maintain river dolphins in good health with successful reproduction needn't mean that this is impossible or that it should never be tried. However, even if it were limited to a small number of experiments, considering the losses that inevitably occur during capture attempts and acclimation, the numbers would add up quickly, in effect draining and further stressing wild populations. Therefore, any such initiative should be considered very carefully, with wide consultation with experts, before any action is taken.

Considering the admirable, long-term struggles by Indian scientists and conservationists to conserve Asian freshwater dolphins, and particularly the progress made in India towards establishing high-level protected areas for these animals, it would be much preferable to hear that the government has decided to step up enforcement measures and is making efforts to consolidate and expand the existing sanctions against deliberate capture. The beloved susu can be treasured as a national aquatic animal most effectively by ensuring that it remains present in healthy numbers in parts of the river systems where it already occurs, and by striving to create (or re-create) conditions allowing it to return to areas where it was present in the past but has now disappeared.

It is a pleasant surprise to see the small and somewhat cryptic freshwater dolphin occupying the "throne" of national aquatic animal throne when so many national animals are charismatic mega-vertebrates. Ganga dolphins are generally shy, almost totally blind and not at all colorful. They are neither large and imposing nor aggressive and dangerous. All things considered, it is an admirable decision by the Central Government to give this honour to the susu (as the Ganga dolphin is often called in India).

It is my hope, and one that I am sure is shared by many colleagues both in India and around the world, is that instead of even thinking about raiding wild populations to stock captive facilities, the Ministry of Environment, Government of India will decide to invest more heavily in efforts to maintain and restore natural features of the freshwater systems that support wild dolphin populations.

It is important to emphasize that there is no need to bring these animals into captivity in order for people to have opportunities to see and appreciate them. In many parts of the subcontinent, dolphins are a part of the everyday lives of river people and

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can easily be seen by visitors who are provided with proper guidance. Dolphins don't represent any sort of danger to human beings. Nor are they reclusive and hard to observe, as long as they are allowed to simply get on with their lives where people are getting on with theirs.

Another point to bear in mind is that susus, or Ganga dolphins, are not at all like the dolphins that live in the popular imagination, thanks to things like Discovery Channel and National Geographic. They are not easily trained to "entertain" in the same way marine dolphins are trained to behave and perform in captive conditions. As a dignified institution, the National Zoo may want to think this through carefully. These dolphins will not attract and please crowds of people who, having seen them in captivity, would be motivated to stop collecting and using dolphin oil, or who would complain about things like water development projects and toxic contaminants in the water. People who wish to see freshwater dolphins can already seek out and find opportunities to observe them in the wild. At the same time, captive displays may prove disappointing and fall short of the public's high expectations,

meaning that little, if any, purpose was served by the removal of dolphins from the river and by investing the enormous amount of money required to build comfortable and safe facilities for river dolphins in Delhi.

Returning to the IUCN Action Plan, it summarises the issue by stating :

"As a general principle, dolphins should not be captured or removed from a wild population unless that specific population has been assessed and it has been determined that a certain amount of culling can be allowed without reducing the population's long-term viability or compromising its role in the ecosystem. Such an assessment, including delineation of stock boundaries, abundance, reproductive potential, mortality, and status (trend) cannot be achieved quickly or inexpensively, and the results should be reviewed by an independent group of scientists before any captures are made."

In short, I simply urge the national government to protect its new national animal as a treasure in the wild.

Appendix

Live-captures for captive display *Dolphins, Whales and Porpoises: 2002-2010 Conservation Action Plan for the World's Cetaceans. IUCN Action Plan 2002-2010.*

Removal of live cetaceans from the wild, for captive display and/or research, is equivalent to incidental or deliberate killing, as the animals brought into captivity (or killed during capture operations) are no longer available to help maintain their natural populations. When unmanaged and undertaken without a rigorous program of research and monitoring, live-capture can become a serious threat to local cetacean populations. All too often, entrepreneurs take advantage of lax (or non-existent) regulations in small island states or less-developed countries, catching animals from populations that are already under pressure from bycatch, habitat degradation, and other factors. For example, at least 22 Irrawaddy dolphins were taken from the Mahakam River system in Indonesia between 1974 and 1984 to supply the aquarium trade (Tas'an and Leatherwood 1984; Wirawan 1989). The Mahakam population is known to be very small (probably less than 50 individuals) and subject to a variety of ongoing threats, including the possibility of more live-captures (Chapters 4, 5, and 6). This population was classified as Critically Endangered by IUCN in 2000. Live-capture activities involving bottlenose dolphins (both *Tursiops truncatus* and *T. aduncus*), Irrawaddy dolphins, and Indo-Pacific hump-backed dolphins have taken place in various countries during recent years (e.g., Cuba, Bahamas, Mexico, Guinea-Bissau, Cambodia, and Myanmar), without adequate assessment of the wild populations and with little or no public disclosure of the numbers taken.

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Reeves, R.R., B.D. Smith, E.A. Crespo, and G. Notarbartolo di Sciarra (Compilers). 2003. *Dolphins, Whales and Porpoises: 2002-2010 Conservation Action Plan for the World's Cetaceans*. IUCN/SSC Cetacean Specialist Group. IUCN, Gland, Switzerland and Cambridge, UK. ix + 139 pp.