

# PUNJAB BATS FOR CONSERVATION OF INDUS RIVER DOLPHIN

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Environmental Conservation, Sustainable Development, and EIA

The Indus river dolphin is classified as endangered by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and, until recently, it was believed that these dolphins were endemic to Pakistan. File | Photo Credit: [AFP](#)

The census of one of the world's most threatened cetaceans, the Indus river dolphin (*Platanista gangetica minor*) — a freshwater dolphin that is found in river Beas, is all set to commence in the winter as part of a project by the Centre. However, Punjab's wildlife preservation wing has gone a step ahead to not only protect the dolphins but also their natural habitat.

The Indus river dolphin is classified as endangered by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and, until recently, it was believed that these dolphins were endemic to Pakistan. But in 2007, a remnant but viable population of Indus dolphins was discovered in Punjab's Harike wildlife sanctuary and in the lower Beas river. Since its discovery, research is being done by Punjab's Department of Forests and Wildlife Preservation in partnership with WWF-India on the current distribution, habitat use and population abundance of the mammal. The Indus river dolphin was declared the State aquatic animal of Punjab in 2019.

"Enumeration of freshwater dolphins is being undertaken as a nationwide project of the Central Government. At the State level, the Punjab Government has taken the initiative for conservation of dolphins and its habitat. The State Government has recently sent a proposal to the Government of India that focuses on a multi-pronged strategy, including habitat management, research, monitoring, advocacy, and environmental education," Gitanjali Kanwar, coordinator — rivers, wetlands and water policy, WWF-India, told *The Hindu*. "The project is to be implemented over five years. Emphasis will be laid to collect data on spatial and temporal distribution pattern of species and population status through an established and approved methodology. Habitat improvement will be an important component of the project," she said.

"Alongside research, importance will be on engaging the riparian communities by encouraging community-led biological monitoring. Villages around the hot spot sites of dolphin occurrence will be developed as models for community-led conservation. Extension programmes will be held to develop a group of dedicated individuals, called 'Beas-Dolphin Mitras' [friends and protectors] of the river Beas. The project also will embark on dolphin eco-tourism. We will adopt a participatory process to address various water conservation-related issues, including protection of freshwater habitats and species," said Ms. Kanwar.

The Beas river supports a viable population of several key aquatic species and the 185 km stretch of the river starting from 52 Headworks, Talwara to Harike Headworks was declared as the Beas Conservation Reserve in 2018.

While the State government's proposal surrounding conservation of the Indus dolphins and restore its freshwater habitats awaits an approval from the Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, the scientific enumeration under 'Project Dolphin' is set to begin in the winter season in Punjab, which is being seen as a first key step towards the conservation effort.

Till now the enumeration of freshwater dolphins was being done in different areas of the country with different methodologies. Now, the Wildlife Institute of India has created a standardised

methodology for the counting. Based on this methodology, the counting of dolphins across the country, including Punjab, would be done.

After this we will have a nationwide count — this is one of the key steps towards conservation. “The enumeration process for dolphins is not an easy task, especially in rivers, as they are visible for few split seconds. Several training workshops have been held and a few are in process to adequately train the people involved on getting a reliable count of dolphins. We are all set to begin with counting in the next few days,” she said.

Direct count surveys of Indus river dolphins in Punjab have been conducted since 2008 and they indicate that their population is critically small, numbering less than 10. The numbers have been approximately stable over time and there is no suggestion of a decline, and calves are sighted annually, Ms. Kanwar said. The dolphins are found principally between the Harike barrage and Beas town and they are only very rarely reported further upstream or downstream of that range.

The field surveys conducted jointly by the Department of Forests and Wildlife Preservation and WWF-India clearly indicate two hotspots of dolphin occurrence. The first area is in the vicinity of Verowal and Gagrewal in the Tarn Taran district of Punjab and the second further downstream near Karmowala and Mundapind in the Tarn Taran district of Punjab,” said Ms. Kanwar.

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