

# Indus River Dolphins



Indus river dolphins are one of only four river dolphin species and subspecies in the world that spend all of their lives in freshwater. They are believed to have originated in the ancient Tethys Sea. When the sea dried up approximately 50 million years ago, the dolphins were forced to adapt to its only remaining habitat—rivers. Only about 1,100 exist today in the lower parts of the Indus River in Pakistan. Numbers declined dramatically after the construction of an irrigation system. Most dolphins are confined to a 750 mile stretch of the river and divided into isolated populations by six barrages. They have adapted to life in the muddy river and are functionally blind. They rely on echolocation to navigate, communicate and hunt prey including prawns, catfish and carp.

## **What's the difference between a dolphin and a porpoise? And other river dolphin facts**

When we think of dolphins and porpoises, we often don't think of fresh water. But in parts of South America and Asia, several rivers are home to these charismatic species. Dolphins are among the world's oldest creatures, along with some species of turtles, crocodiles and sharks. They provide important indicators of the health of rivers.

## **WHY THEY MATTER**



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Indus river dolphins are found only in Pakistan. Like other freshwater dolphins, the Indus river dolphin is an important indicator of the health of a river.



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The main reason for the initial decline of the Indus river dolphin population was the construction of numerous dams and barrages that began in the 1930s. This construction split the population into small groups, degraded their habitat and impeded migration. Now the major threats include accidental capture in fishing nets, plus they are hunted for their meat, oil and for use in traditional medicines.

## **HABITAT FRAGMENTATION AND LOSS**

The construction of barrages has resulted in habitat fragmentation. Dolphins are no longer found in the lower parts of the Indus River due to water extraction which dries up downstream channels for several months each year. Some dolphins that have moved downstream are unable to swim back upstream because of strong currents and barrages.

Over 37,000 miles of irrigation canals lead to dolphins becoming stranded in the irrigation canals and because these instances usually go unreported and many Indus river dolphins die without being rescued.

## **HUNTING**

Some communities who rely heavily on fishing think of the Indus River dolphin as competition for fish so poaching still occurs sporadically despite a ban on hunting.

## **BYCATCH**

Fishing nets are set for extended hours and often overnight. Dolphins get trapped in the nets and drown. This accidental capture of the dolphins is known as bycatch.

## **POLLUTION**

Untreated sewage from communities that reside along irrigation canals and the banks of the Indus River directly pollutes the water. Washing clothes and utensils in the river also causes pollution. Industrial pollution has allegedly caused a massive quantity of fish deaths in urban areas, which affects the Indus river dolphins' food supply. Pesticides from sugarcane and cotton crops also pollute the riverbank.

# WHAT WWF IS DOING

Rescuing an Indus river dolphin.



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## RESEARCH AND MONITORING

WWF monitors the Indus river dolphin populations and tracks their movements with radio tags. These tags revealed for the first time that the dolphins can cross the barrage gates in both upstream and downstream directions. In 2001, WWF coordinated the largest Indus river dolphin survey ever conducted.

## REDUCING POLLUTION

WWF and the Sindh Agriculture Extension Department improve agricultural practices near dolphin habitat to reduce pollution in the Indus River. Farmer Field Schools are used to create widespread awareness among farming communities about how inappropriate irrigation practices and the indiscriminate use of toxic chemicals affects dolphins. Experts work with participating farmers to demonstrate the benefits of using less water and chemicals on cash crops like cotton.

## EDUCATION AND RESCUE

Since 2000, WWF and the Sindh Wildlife Department have rescued 80 dolphins from irrigation canals. WWF also educates fishermen who are engaged in promoting ecotourism activities, particularly dolphin watches, about the importance of protecting the Indus river dolphin.

