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Indus dolphins at risk due to receding water, shortage of feed

January 25, 2009

By Jan Khaskheli

Karachi: Rare dolphins have been found dead or injured in canals off the Indus River. Officials from the Sindh Wildlife Department (SWD) believe that receding river water and a shortage of feed might be the cause of these deaths.

“The number of dolphins in the Indus River has increased sufficiently overall, but persistent water shortage and decreasing amount of fish in the reserve are causing them to die,” Hussain Bakhsh Bhagat, Sindh Wildlife Conservator, told The News. The Indus River dolphin (*Platanista minor*), locally known as Bhulan, is one of the rarest mammals in the world, and the second most endangered freshwater river dolphin. During monsoon rains, it migrates upstream into the smaller tributaries and downstream to the main channels in the dry season, sometimes carrying its young on its back above the surface of the water. Very sensitive to its local environment, it cannot survive for long in other waters, as the governments of China, Switzerland and Japan discovered in the seventies when taking away rare mammals from the Indus River for research purposes.

“These dolphins die within a short period after they are brought out of the Indus River,” explained Bhagat. Unfortunately, when these dolphins travel for search of feed in the Indus water, they often get trapped by canals or strangled by the iron gates. According to SWD officials, this usually happens every January, which is when the canals are rotated. “In January, most of the gates of the Sukkur and Guddu barrages are closed, trapping dolphins from nearby canals,” said the officials.

The SWD and Worldwide Fund (WWF) Pakistan claim to have set up dolphin conservation centres at different areas to protect the species. Attempts to preserve the dolphins date back to 1974, when a 192-kilometre stretch between the Guddu and Sukkur barrages was declared as a dolphin reserve. Even so, many still die in these waters today. Conservationists believe that the deaths of so many dolphins in different locations are indicative of an environmental disaster in the protected Indus River Dolphin Reserve, which is also a Ramsar site.

Indus dolphins entered the limelight in 1995 when many were found trapped in canals. It is believed that over-fishing from the river is the main reason these dolphins are forced to travel to nearby canals. Bhagat said that on a self-help basis, the SWD officials managed to save 13 dolphins reported strangled. “Later we observed that the numbers of trapped and dying dolphins trapped were increasing unimaginably.”

By 2000, the shocking trend had attracted the attention of international wildlife conservation bodies, WWF Pakistan and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). In a bid to save the dolphins, from 2001 to 2005 the UNDP tasked the SWD through the Lahore Zoo management to preserve the species in its natural habitat. During the five-year project, the SWD officials rescued 65 dolphins. Till date, 80 dolphins have been rescued and released back into the river.

“Some died during the rescue operation or before we could reach them,” admitted Bhagat. Despite the rescue operation, there is still uncertainty about the total number of dolphins remaining. According to an SWD survey conducted in 2006, the population stands at 820, while research from the WWF Pakistan in Sukkur shows the figure to be over 1,100. However, independent conservationists estimate that there are no more than 200 dolphins left in their natural reserve. They have criticised the organisations concerned for not having adequate equipment.

“The Indus dolphin is indigenous and should be protected,” said Amar Leghari, author of four books on environment and wildlife. “Hundreds of millions of rupees are being spent on the conservation of the species, but the incidents of death are increasing. Why can they not install cheap nets at the canal gates to stop the blind mammal from entering?”