Global Coalition for River Dolphin Conservation; securing the long-term future of river dolphins and their rivers, and the communities who depend on them

The following organisations, all of which have worked for many years to conserve river dolphins and/or their rivers, have formed a coalition to help the sharing of knowledge and expertise, and to ensure synergies in our actions to secure a viable future for river dolphins, their rivers, and the communities who depend on them.

Members of the Coalition

Below is the list of founding members, with membership continuing to grow.

- Amazon Waters Alliance
- Aqualie Institute
- Bhulan Bachao
- BurmaDolphins
- Chinese Academy of Science
- Engro Foundation
- Faunagua
- INABIO
- IUCN Cetacean Specialist Group
- Mamiraua Foundation for Sustainable Development
- Myanmar Biodiversity Fund
- National Marine Mammal Foundation
- Omacha Foundation
- Proyecto Sotalia
- Sarasota Dolphin Research Program
- Sea Mammal Research Unit
- Sea Shepherd Brasil
- Solinia
- South American River Dolphin Initiative
- Universidad Evangelica
- University of Veterinary and Animal Sciences, Pakistan
- Whale and Dolphin Conservation
- WWF
- Yayasan Konservasi RASI

Our purpose: is to halt and reverse the decline of river dolphin populations in Asia and South America, and stabilise and increase the most threatened populations. With this global and coordinated coalition, we will help protect river dolphins and their habitats, while improving riverine community livelihoods, ecosystem services, climate resilience, and water quality for the benefit of people and nature.
We acknowledge that:

- river dolphins are iconic flagship species representing the rich diversity of life that inhabits the river basins\(^1\) in which they are found, spanning eight countries in Asia and six in South America. They are key species in the food chain of these freshwater ecosystems; their presence means the health and survival of scores of other species, as well as the health and the sustainability of livelihoods of millions of people who share their habitats;
- all six globally recognised river cetacean species\(^2\) are categorised by the IUCN as being Endangered or Critically Endangered. The threats faced by river dolphins and their rivers are too great and varied to be dealt with only country-by-country or species-by-species: a global and coordinated effort is critical for their survival;
- whilst many of the actions needed to conserve river dolphins and their rivers are primarily a national responsibility, increased cooperation and coordination of efforts among the range countries is essential;
- global conservation strategies are needed that respond to critical threats to river dolphins and their rivers, and funding for protection, research, and alternative and/or complementary livelihood development should be mobilised from development partners and financial institutions and directed to the places that river dolphins inhabit.
- the reversal of the crisis facing river dolphin populations and their rivers can benefit from cooperation and support from the international community; saving these populations and conserving their rivers is a shared responsibility and by working together we can galvanise efforts and increase cooperation and attention on these important species.
- members of this Coalition have a vast array of skills, knowledge, and areas of focus for their work. Therefore, Coalition members will engage on those priorities most suited to their organisation.

**Our approach** is to work together to:

- address those threats to river dolphins and their rivers that are most immediate and severe:
  - Fisheries-related mortality and unsustainable fishing: bycatch is the number one cause of river dolphin mortality worldwide, which, together with intentional killing of river dolphins for fish bait and meat, affects several thousand dolphins per year. River dolphin bycatch and unsustainable fishing occur during both legal and illegal fishing activities and will need creativity if they are to be addressed, whilst ensuring viable livelihoods for riverine communities.
  - Man-made water infrastructure: hydropower dams, irrigation diversion barrages and embankments all affect habitat connectivity, and the quantity and quality of water. In Asia, river dolphin habitat has decreased by 50-70% and in South America by 10%. It is key for new infrastructure projects to be nature positive and river dolphin sensitive.

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\(^1\) Amazon, Orinoco, Araguaia-Tocantins, Ayeyarwady, Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna, Karnaphuli-Sangu, Indus, Beas, Mahakam, Mekong, Yangtze

\(^2\) Amazon river dolphin (*Inia geoffrensis*), Ganges river dolphin (*Platanista gangetica*), Indus river dolphin (*Platanista minor*), Irrawaddy dolphin (*Orcaella brevirostris*), tucuxi (*Sotalia fluviatilis*), Yangtze finless porpoise (*Neophocaena asiaeorientalis asiaeorientalis*)
o Water quality: mining, agriculture, and industrial activities can all degrade water quality. Deteriorating water quality due to agriculture runoff and industrial effluents is a serious threat to dolphins in Asia, while mercury poisoning due to gold mining has been found in dolphins in both Asia and South America.

o Low public awareness of river dolphins, including their critically endangered status.
  • support the range country governments to implement the Global River Dolphin Declaration, and the associated pledges for action that will deliver game-changing results.
  • help secure funds to implement the Declaration commitments: national, bilateral, and multilateral funding.
  • share and build our knowledge and skills at every opportunity.

We hereby agree on the following priorities:

1. To effectively manage, conserve, protect, and restore river dolphin habitats, including:
   a. Creating a network of protected river habitats by:
      i. Improving the protection and profile of river dolphin habitats, including those on Indigenous, community and private lands, thereby creating a network of river habitats under conservation management.
      ii. Scientific designation of important river dolphin habitat as Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs)
   b. Increasing river dolphin site-management effectiveness.
      Strengthening protected habitat management, basing it on:
      i. Regular spatial monitoring of river dolphins, and the use of advanced tools and technologies to support conservation.
      ii. Building capacity of institutions and stakeholders involved in science and training and supporting the creation and maintenance of an interactive platform for knowledge exchange at all levels.

2. To drive river dolphin research and threat monitoring: working collaboratively on transboundary research opportunities, which may include, but is not limited to, tracking river dolphin movements, population trends and abundance monitoring, citizen science, community engagement, acoustic monitoring, and monitoring of threats such as pollution, inappropriate fishing practices, climate change, deforestation, infrastructure development, and illegal trade.

3. To strengthen engagement with local communities and indigenous peoples, recognising that they are key players in river dolphin conservation, including via citizen science monitoring, community management agreements, Other Effective area-based Conservation Measures (OECMS), and collaboration mechanisms.

4. To eradicate fishing practices that are harmful to river dolphins, and unsustainable fishing, while ensuring sustainable livelihoods for fishers: working collaboratively to eradicate fishing practices that negatively affect the survival of river dolphins, through injuries and deaths caused by net entanglement and illegal fishing (e.g. electrofishing, poisoning), through non-accidental deaths (e.g. usage for fishing-bait), and through overfishing, by:
   a. Sharing knowledge, experience, and technology.
   b. Strengthening national fisheries legislation, institutions, and law enforcement.
   c. Engaging and strengthening work with Indigenous and/or local fishing communities to work closely together on biodiversity conservation, on minimising negative impacts on river
dolphins, their prey and habitats, and on reducing conflicts by enabling sustainable and alternative/complementary livelihood options, and by promoting 'wise use of wetlands' through incentives and technical guidance'.

5. To engage with international and domestic industries, and other relevant stakeholders, to tackle water quality and quantity issues that affect river dolphins, fisheries, and community health, by:

a. Strengthening national water quality legislation, institutions, and law enforcement to ensure water quality standards that enable river dolphins and communities to thrive.

b. Supporting industries, municipalities, and other relevant stakeholders to improve efficiency and reduce their water use (allocation), regulate the use of harmful chemicals, and to increase waste water treatment by providing financial and technical support. Also to help strengthen efforts to control and eliminate illegal mining, which pollutes rivers and ecosystems and thereby harms river dolphins.

6. To build river dolphin conservation awareness by promoting and celebrating Global River Dolphin Day annually in October, as part of a long-term national and global awareness-raising programme to highlight the value of wild river cetaceans and their habitats, for people and nature.

7. To engage with development partners, (international) financial institutions, civil society organisations, and private sector actors to make the above possible via the provision and/or mobilisation of financial and technical support.

Example areas of coordination include, but are not limited to:

a. Taking action together to:
   • support implementation of the Global River Dolphin Declaration and associated pledges, including identification of projects we can work on together, and identification and engagement of key stakeholders;
   • implement a united and fast response to crises and emergency situations;
   • implement joint communications, public engagement, and campaigns;
   • liaise on fundraising opportunities.

b. Sharing knowledge and information by:
   • sharing literature and news, including using the riverdolphins.org website;
   • sharing technology;
   • participating in each other’s webinars and other information sharing and learning events;
   • sharing and aligning data;
   • translation of key documents into multiple languages.