

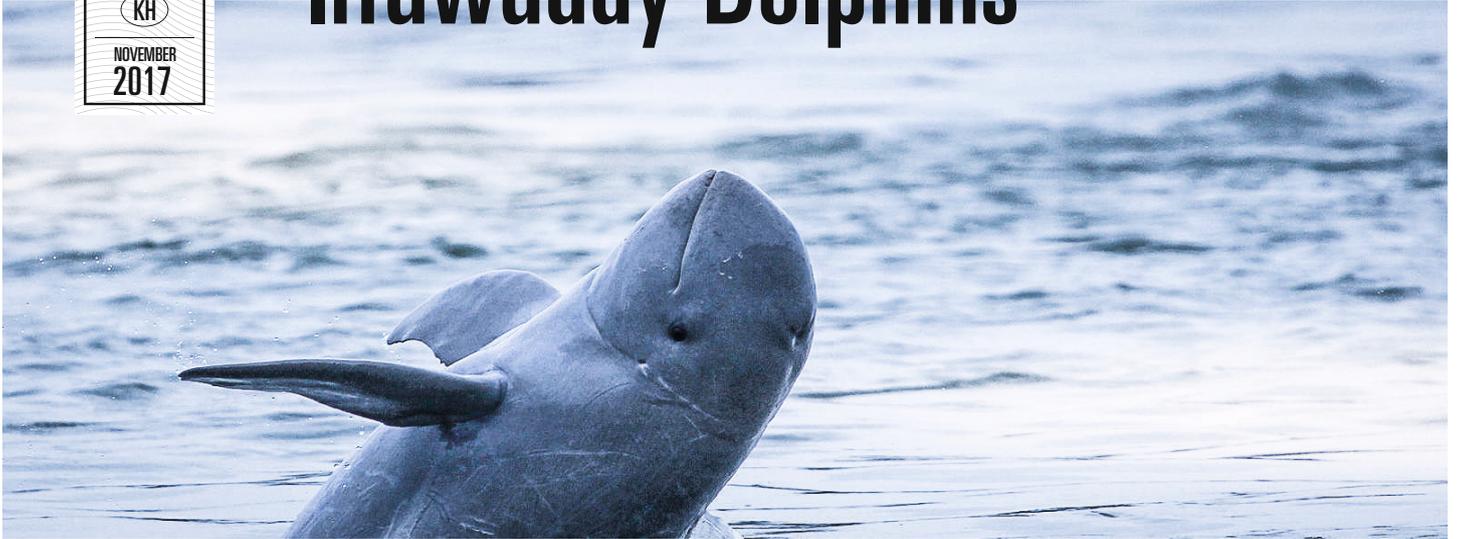


FACTSHEET

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# Conservation of Mekong Irrawaddy Dolphins



## What are Irrawaddy Dolphins and why are WWF protecting them?

The Irrawaddy dolphins in the Mekong river are the largest of seven known freshwater populations of this species in the world. In Cambodia, with a total population of 80 breeding adults, the species is considered a national treasure. Operating in the 190 kilometres between Kratie town and the Laos boarder, WWF-Cambodia in collaboration with the Fisheries Administration (FiA) has been working on conserving the species for thirteen years to protect their habitat, ensure their survival, and build their future.

Irrawaddy dolphins are shy mammals of dark grey colour, with a small rounded dorsal fin and a bluntly rounded head. Adults weight between 90 and 150 kg, and measure 2.10-2.75 metres in length. Their diet includes fish, crustaceans, and squid. Irrawaddy dolphins often live in deep pool river areas and are generally found in small groups of up to ten, and have a life span of up to thirty years.

The Irrawaddy dolphin is fundamental to the overall ecosystem of the Mekong River and is a direct indication for ecosystem health. They act as a natural quality control measure by helping to curb the spread of diseases amongst freshwater species.

Known as an 'Apex' animal, the species thrones at the top of the food chain, has no natural

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predators and thus controls populations of other species below. Subsequently, if dolphin populations decline to unrecoverable levels, other species' populations and surrounding ecosystems are thrown out of balance as well. Not only freshwater biodiversity, but also livelihoods of communities that rely on the Mekong river's facilities, are therefore directly linked to a healthy dolphin population.

## Status: Threats and conservation efforts already in place

The Irrawaddy dolphin is listed as 'critically endangered' on the internationally established threat ranking, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature's (IUCN) Red List. It is also classified as one of the 58 endangered fisheries species under the Royal Government of Cambodia's sub-decree. Despite constituting the top of the food chain, they encounter human populations who also benefit from the Mekong River. Over time however, that contact has become more concentrated and intensive as pressure on Cambodia's freshwater resources has increased, leading to the dolphins' rapid decline in numbers over the past 50 years.

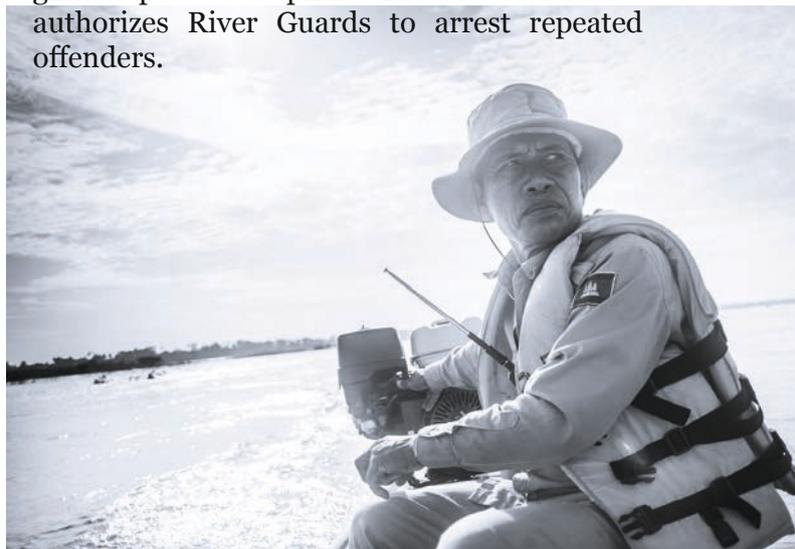
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**Continuation of 'Status: Threats and conservation efforts already in place'**

The human-induced threats include the use of gillnets which drown the dolphins; illegal fishing practises such as electro-fishing or poisoning; vessel strikes from large fishing boats; crowded tourism and sightseeing areas; as well as degradation of their environment through overfishing, river pollution, water fluctuation and waterway modifications such as hydropower dam development and sand mining. All these actions have negative consequences for dolphin populations as they can alter sediment and freshwater flows, change water quality and quantity, and reduce availability of fish stocks.

The Cambodian Government, under WWF-Cambodia's support, has been determined in creating legislation and regulations as a response to the threats and declining dolphin populations. In 2012, the Government of Cambodia issued a sub-decree on The Mekong Dolphins' Managerial Protection Area which bans and restricts any use of gillnets either entirely or during certain times of the year. In order to enforce the ban on gillnets, the Cambodian government deployed the River Guards.

Formed in 2006, the River Guards are a group of patrollers consisting of civil servants, military forces, villagers, and local community representatives. 72 river guards of 16 different outposts stretching from Kratie to Stung Treng (Cambodian-Lao border) are responsible for daily monitoring along the Mekong River. During patrols, river guards confiscate gillnets and educate fishermen about the threats that gillnets pose to dolphins. The sub-decree also authorizes River Guards to arrest repeated offenders.



In January 2012, WWF, the Fisheries Administration, and the Commission for Conservation and Development of Mekong River Dolphin Ecotourism Zone (Dolphin Commission) convened a workshop resulting in the signing and ratification of the 'Kratie Declaration on the Conservation of the Mekong River Irrawaddy Dolphins'. This commits the three conveners to jointly develop and implement a conservation strategy which focuses on four key areas.

### **Threat reduction**

... through law enforcement and community engagement in terms of natural resource management such as community fisheries, community forestry, and alternative livelihoods.

### **Education and awareness**

... through community workshops, trainings, and disseminating information through various platforms and methods.

### **Research**

... through behavioural studies, photo I.D surveys for population monitoring, movement and habitat use as well as investigating a cause of mortality through carcasses collection and necropsy.

### **Promoting regional cooperation and coordination**

... with Lao PDR to manage transboundary fishery and dolphin habitat by working through official government agencies, communities, and cross-country NGO partnerships.

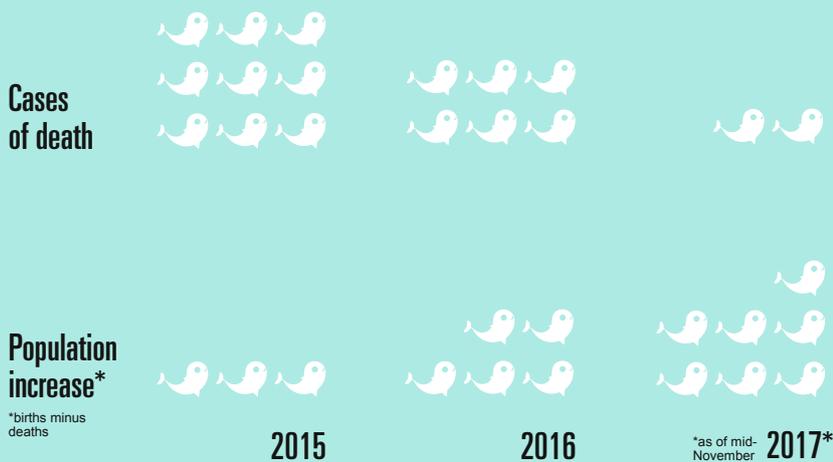
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## What WWF-Cambodia has achieved so far

The institutional mechanisms put in place have been fundamental in being able to achieve measured success. WWF-Cambodia in collaboration with FiA, provincial authorities, and local communities have been implementing series of the recommendations in the Kratie declaration above and achieved

several significantly positive results. Starting with the stabilization of the dolphin population since 2010, numbers of new born calves have been significantly rising, with an annual average number from five to twelve calves since 2007. At the same time, the mortality rate constantly declined: from nine deaths in 2015 to six in 2016, and only two in 2017 (as of mid-November), with nine calves

born in the same year. Contributing to these results is the attainment of a highly skilled staff base. Their training, knowledge, and capabilities enable them to carry out effective conservation work. Over the years, community members have become familiar with the conservation project and WWF has become a respected and well-known organisation in the region. This, together with having close ties to local media, government officials, and villagers, has contributed to the overall success. Positive results are usually shared with all stakeholders and interested parties.



## Supporting the conservation project and law enforcement



Looking into the future, the conservation project must develop towards strengthening the capacity of the River Guards to ensure essential skills to enforce the law. WWF supports regular training on how to conduct investigations of illegal activities along the river, but is planning to further develop this programme.

In addition to giving trainings, WWF has donated equipment to river guards. GPS devices and smartphones support them on their fight against illegal activity during their patrols after receiving information from the hotline system, and enables them to do record data and immediately report activities.

Despite improvement and successes in their performance, River Guards still need more support from the Cambodian government and development partners to ensure that they have enough equipment and other smart

tools as well as sufficient knowledge, skills, and training, to carry out their vital duties. Tools and equipment such as binoculars, solar power panels, compasses, GPS devices, life jackets, radio transmitters, and cameras are always needed to support river guarding and law enforcement activities. WWF-Cambodia's dolphin conservation work is at a critical juncture at which tangible and sustainable results are starting to be realized. The continuation of these efforts and positive results in the future rely on robust and well-managed law enforcement accompanied by specialized training and up-to-date equipment.

## Thank you!



The most recently horn calf, captured in October 2017



### Why we are here

To stop the degradation of the planet's natural environment and to build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature.

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