

A photograph of an Indus River Dolphin leaping from the water, its long, pointed snout and dorsal fin visible against a dark background.

BHULAN DOST

STORIES FROM LOCAL COMMUNITIES LEADING THE MONITORING
AND PROTECTION OF THE INDUS RIVER DOLPHIN AND
RIVERINE BIODIVERSITY



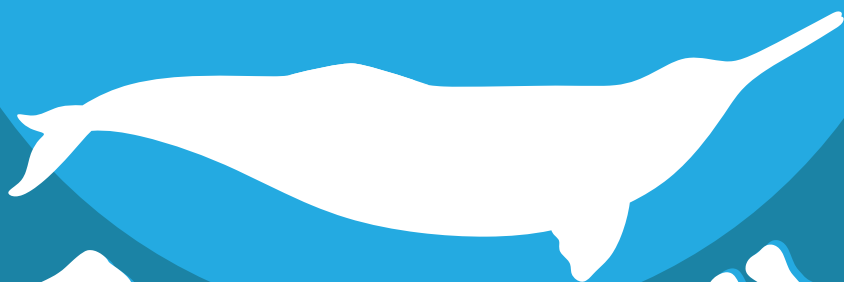
BHULAN DOST

FRIENDS OF THE INDUS DOLPHIN



The Bulhan Dost Programme engages and fosters community stewardship, enhancing their motivation for protecting the Indus River and its vital biodiversity. This initiative represents a unique integration of community stewardship and citizen engagement, building on WWF's long-standing collaboration with the fishers of the Indus river. These individuals have played a pivotal role in not only halting the decline of the river's dolphin population but also in doubling it over the past two decades. This program aims to help the people of the mighty Indus River reconnect with the mystic Indus River dolphin – also known as 'Bhulan' whose presence is indicative of the river's overall health. Bulhan Dosts and Sahelis play a crucial role in collecting essential data on the Indus River dolphin, including their sightings, age, and the times they are observed. 232 fishers have enrolled in the Bulhan Dost Programme of which 33 per cent are women fishers.

These stories have been developed and made possible with support from the Darwin Initiative.



ALLAH DINI

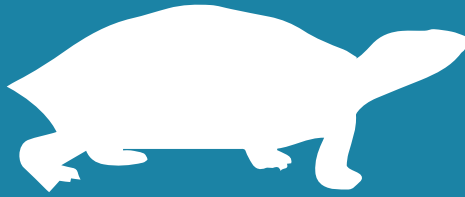
A BUDDING BHULAN SAHELI

I am Allah Dini and I am 56 years old. I just recently became a Bhulan Saheli. I live here in this small town called "Bakhshan Shah," which is situated on the right bank of the Indus River. This town is located downstream from the Guddu Barrage, in the district of Kashmore at Kandhkot.

I come from a traditional fishing community, and spend most of my time working on making and repairing nets, taking care of household chores. Occasionally I also go fishing with my male family members. When I fish, I use tiny or hook nets. Historically, we, like many other fishers, did not pay much attention to the Indus River dolphin because it is a mammal and not something we could eat. Whenever we accidentally trapped a dolphin in our fishing nets or found one stranded in a small lake or irrigation canal, we did not know how to help it, so we would just let it be. We did not know that it had an ecological importance, it was a mystery to us.

It wasn't until we learned about this species and its vital role in aquatic ecosystems like the Indus through WWF-Pakistan that everything changed. Because of them, my family and I became aware of the dolphin's significance. That is when I decided to join their efforts and became a Bhulan Saheli, a team organized by WWF-Pakistan. They have provided us all with a toolkit to help us monitor the dolphins and record data on their mortality and the threats they face.

Now, when we head out for fishing, we are much more mindful about the dolphins. We take special care not to entangle them in our nets, and we keep an eye out to make sure they stay safe. It is a big transformation in our approach, all thanks to the knowledge and tools provided by the Bhulan Saheli team.



EMPOWERING THE NEXT GENERATION

MEEHAR ALI AND AYAZ'S CONSERVATION JOURNEY

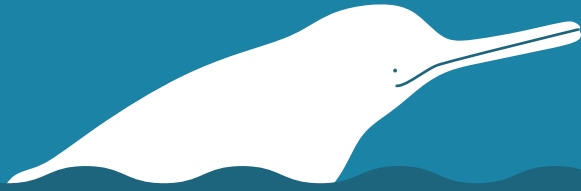
I am Meehar Ali, and I would like to share both mine and my 12-year-old son, Ayaz Ali's, remarkable journey as Bhulan Dost. He and I have both pledged to protect the Indus River dolphin and the biodiversity it supports.

We live in Bakhshan Shah, in the Kashmore and Kandh Kot district. In my childhood, I was always fascinated by the presence of freshwater turtles in our hometown. I wasn't the only one who enjoyed watching these turtles and many other children of the community were equally curious. We used to wonder about what these turtles ate, where they found their shelter, and how they peacefully coexisted with other fish in the river.

In those days, local fishermen were often tempted by poachers who offered significant sums of money for their assistance in catching the turtles. This was mainly due to the lack of awareness regarding the importance of these turtles in our area, leading to their slaughter by the poachers and an increase in mortality due to entanglement in fishing nets. We were unaware of the importance of the dolphin and the turtles. We left them dead and threw them back into the river when they got caught in our nets.

But now, things have taken a positive turn and I vividly remember the transformation in our perspective. We attended an awareness session organized by WWF-Pakistan, who gave us information about these species and their significance for the entire ecosystem. Because of that training, these turtles are no longer perceived as unusual or useless creatures. Thanks to education and awareness, our fellow fishermen now understand the vital role that turtles play in maintaining the river's ecology. These creatures act as natural filters, keeping the water clean, which in turn supports the thriving fish population which is our primary source of income.

We are now protectors of the turtles and ensure that anyone trying to harm them is driven away. I am proud to say that since 2022, there has not been a significant turtle poaching incident in our region. What makes me even happier is that I have brought my son along in this journey with me and seeing him share the same passion for protecting these creatures as I do.



SOOMRI MAI

“STORY OF CHANGE”

In the heart of “village Sherdil Mahar” nestled along the left bank of the majestic Indus River, a success story unfolds, woven with threads of resilience and transformation. Meet Soomri Mai, a 50- year-old Bhulan friend deeply rooted in the traditional fishing community of the Ghotki district.

Soomri’s days were once immersed in the art of crafting and mending nets, a skill passed down through generations, intertwined with the rhythms of daily life. Occasionally, she would join her family in the timeless act of fishing, casting lines into the flowing currents of the Indus.

However, the winds of change blew in through the initiatives of WWF-Pakistan along the Indus, bringing with them a newfound awareness of the vital role dolphins play in the ecosystem. Motivated and inspired, Soomri embraced this enlightenment and eagerly joined the Bholan Sahli team organized by WWF-Pakistan.

In the vibrant tapestry of team meetings, awareness blossomed not only about the environment but also around sustainable livelihood activities. Among these initiatives was the establishment of kitchen gardens, a transformative idea that took root in Soomri’s life. Empowered with initial training and seasonal seeds, she embarked on the journey of kitchen gardening at home.

The once barren patch of land surrounding Soomri’s home now thrives with life, yielding fresh vegetables two to three times a week. The kitchen garden has become a source of abundance, saving 1500 to 2000 vegetables monthly. This not only contributes to the well-being of Soomri’s family but also serves as a testament to the positive impact of sustainable practices on the community’s health.

Soomri Mai’s success story is a testament to the power of community-led initiatives and the transformative potential that comes with environmental awareness. Through her efforts, a once-traditional fisherwoman has become a beacon of change, cultivating not only vegetables but also a sustainable and healthier future for herself, her family, and the entire Ghotki district’s traditional fishing community.



ON THE FRONTLINES OF CONSERVATION

KARIM BUX'S BHULAN DOST MISSION

I am Karim Bux and I lead a group of Bhulan Dost in my village. I received training to become a Bhulan Dost because I am really passionate about conserving the Indus dolphin. I now help in tracking dolphins and collecting data about them and I am eager to learn new skills that can help us protect them.

The project team at WWF-Pakistan visited our village and they noticed my interest in the dolphin and taught me how to use devices such as acoustic pingers, deploying F-PODs, and record data about the dolphins when they come to the surface. I help the field team by watching the dolphins and measuring how far they are from the pingered nets, both when the pinger is on and when it is off. I am actively involved in many dolphin monitoring and recording activities, and it gives me a feeling of pride. whenever i cast fishing nets and found any turtle entangled in fishing nets it has been my first priority to release them alive in the river and i am doing this frequently.

The Indus River dolphin is facing a lot of threats, and its survival is at risk. This species needs special protection to survive in its natural home, and I think about how to protect them all the time. WWF-Pakistan has done a great job in raising awareness about the dolphins, the challenges they face, and how to protect them.

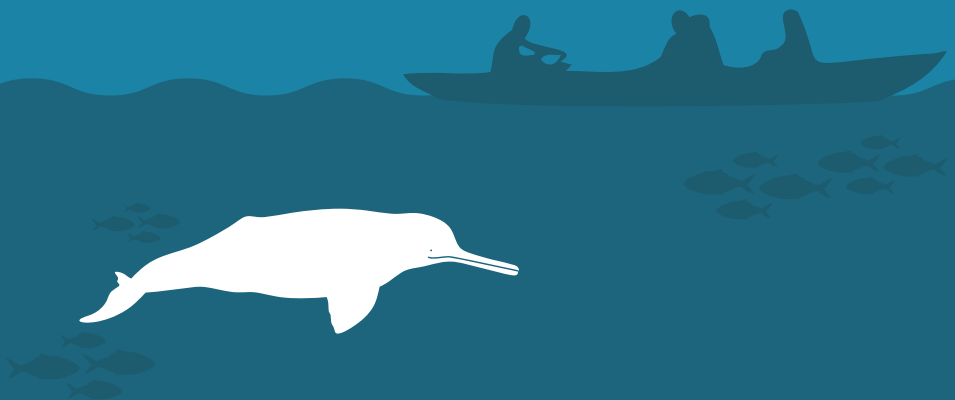
FROM IGNORANCE TO ADVOCACY

ABDUL WAHEED'S JOURNEY WITH THE BHULAN DOSTS

I used to frequent the river for fishing, where I often witnessed dolphins emerging from the water's surface. Initially, I didn't give them much thought and considered them a nuisance, suspecting they were pilfering fish from our nets. Occasionally, these dolphins would unintentionally become entangled in our fishing gear, causing disruptions to our activities. However, my perspective underwent a significant shift upon joining the Bhulan Dost Program. As part of the program, I underwent training in monitoring dolphins and documenting their details on paper-based sheets. Now, during my fishing expeditions, I diligently record every nuance about the dolphins and their surroundings. This newfound responsibility has sparked a genuine enthusiasm in me!

Not just that but I also happen to be the head of our group, and I encourage other members to keep an eye out for illegal fishing methods, spotting dolphins, and to keep a lookout for people who try to catch turtles. We have even noticed a group of otters swimming in it to catch fish. We protect them from hunters too. We also keep an eye on poachers and turtle hunters.

The other Bhulan Dost and I make sure to kick out any poachers who try to harm our river and its creatures. Just last month, a group of poachers was getting ready to hunt turtles, and I alerted the other Bhulan Dost. We rushed over to their camping spot, and together, we made the poachers leave the area and saved the turtles from getting captured. We are really determined and feel a strong sense of responsibility for our river and the animals that call it home. Bhulan Dost like myself volunteer our time to help with these conservation efforts. We are working hard to keep track of the number of all these species and make sure their homes are protected.



BEYOND A HEARTBEAT



HONORING THE VISION OF CHACHA PEHALWAN MAHAR

Chacha Pehalwan Mahar was a very busy and active Bhulan Dost of our village. He passed away recently at the age of 60. He played a big role in helping to protect the Indus River dolphins. He often used to say, "I might be at the end of my journey now, but I have done my part, and now it is up to the next generation to step up and help continue this important task. We need to make sure we do not harm the environment and the lives of our people. It's more important than ever to take strong action to protect the dolphins and their home."

Chacha Pehalwan Mahar inspired his village to get involved in the efforts to conserve the Indus River dolphins. He helped his community understand their responsibility to protect these dolphins and their habitat. He also planted more than 5,000 trees and took care of them like they were his own children. He used to say, "Those trees are my children, and I am like their father." His legacy lives on with them.



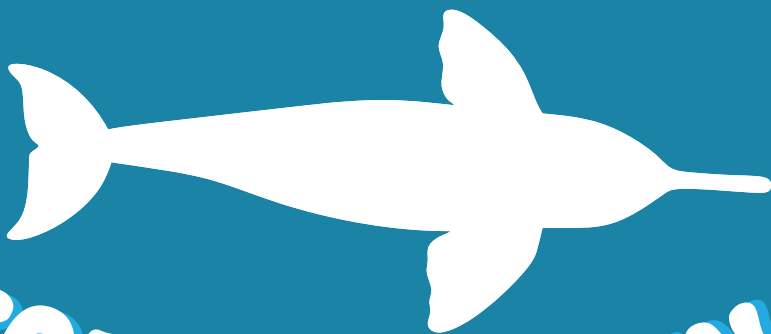
FISHERS ON THE WATCH

MUHAMMAD HANIF'S AND HIS COMMUNITY MONITORING THE DOLPHINS

I am part of a group that loves the Indus River dolphins. We are known as Bhulan Dost. With the help of WWF, we formed our own community. I live in Basti Rakh Dhool Abraind Ghazi Ghat, and thanks to conversations with experts and awareness campaigns, our neighbors now understand how important these dolphins are for our region's environment. We Bhulan Dost protect these dolphins, and we have been trained to use special equipment to keep track of them and collect data about them. Other fishermen in the area like myself are part of this project. We are not only trying to save these rare and endangered dolphins, but we are also making sure they stay safe and thrive.

I have learned how to rescue dolphins if they are in trouble, and I keep a lookout for them when I am out fishing. We also used to have a problem with people hunting birds illegally, but things have changed for the better. The members of our group now know not to hunt birds for no good reason, and we tell others in our community and any visitors to stop shooting or capturing birds illegally. It's not just about the dolphins it's about taking care of our environment in general and being responsible for it.





YOUTH LEADING THE WAY

TALIB HUSSAIN'S JOURNEY AS A DOLPHIN DOST

I am Talib Hussain, and I am a young Bhulan Dost living in Rakh Dhool Abrind Ghazi Ghat. I am really passionate about finding better ways to protect and take care of the Indus River dolphins in our region. I have been working hard to make sure my community does a better job of safeguarding these special dolphins.

One big change we have made is to stop using harmful things like chemicals, generators, and explosives to catch more fish. These practices were not only bad for the environment but also put the dolphins at risk. Now, thanks to my efforts and the support of my fellow fishermen, we have completely stopped these harmful practices. If we see anyone doing illegal fishing or if a dolphin gets trapped in illegal nets, we make sure to report it to the WWF-Pakistan field team right away.

This way we are all looking out for the dolphins and their safety. Our sense of responsibility and the work we do with our community has really made a difference. The number of dolphins getting hurt or killed has gone down, and this is a big win for not just the Indus dolphins but our community in general.

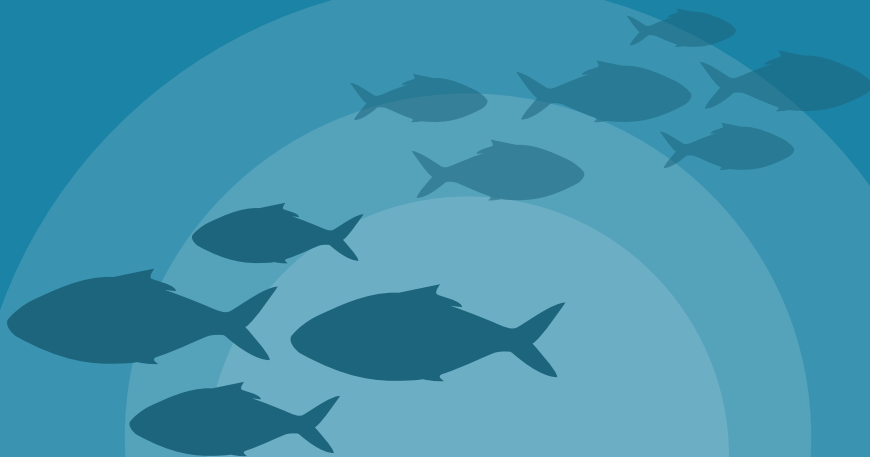
I am also proud to say that we have made a positive impact in another way too. Before, people used to hunt freshwater turtles to sell on the black market, but now, they have stopped doing that. The word is spreading, and people are becoming more aware of the importance of protecting these turtles. It is great to see these positive changes happening in our community and be a part of it.

FROM FISHER TO STEWARDS

MUHAMMAD WARAGI'S DOLPHIN DOST INITIATIVES

I Muhammad Waragi, am a wholehearted supporter of the Bhulan Dost programme. I live near Bait Qaim Wala Head, close to Taunsa Barrage. I have been pleasantly surprised by how this programme has managed to bring our entire community together for a common cause. Guided by the field teams, I have taken on the role of educating the older generation about the importance of using legal fishing nets and promoting sustainable fishing practices among them. This newfound awareness has made a significant difference in how our fishermen perceive our environment, especially the importance of the Indus River. We now understand that it's more than just a source of our livelihood, it is a fragile ecosystem that supports a whole chain of interconnected species.

One remarkable outcome of the Bhulan Dost Programme is its success in reducing illegal wildlife trade and deforestation at Lashri Wala Jungle. Encouraged by this success, my group and I actively report any illegal activities within other fisher communities. This demonstrates how the programme effectively encourages responsible actions and helps protect our natural resources. Our community's unity and commitment to safeguarding our environment have been truly transformative.



WOMEN LEADING THE WAY

BASHERIAN MAI'S IMPACT ON DOLPHIN CONSERVATION

I am Basherian Mai, and I am proud to be a devoted friend of the Bhulan Dost in Bait Qaim Wala, Taunsa Barrage. I never miss any of the Bhulan Dost training or awareness sessions because I strongly believe in this mission. To me, the main goal of the Bhulan Dost programme was to reduce poverty, which was causing a lot of problems in our community. Issues like illegal fishing, overfishing, dolphins getting trapped and dying, and the hunting of turtles were all connected to this.

But now, things have taken a turn for the better. Our fisherwomen have discovered new ways to make a living. They are crafting hand fans, sewing clothes, and creating beautiful jewelry. They have realized that harming the environment by engaging in illegal hunting, using explosives, or generators is not the way to go. What is even more exciting is that many fisherwomen and community members are making or repairing fishing nets that follow the legal size rules. These nets are becoming widely used, which not only makes fishing sustainable but also protects our environment and the animals that depend on it. It is a wonderful change for our community, and I am thrilled to be a part of it.



RIVER SISTERS

ZANIB MAI'S UNBREAKABLE BOND WITH DOLPHINS

I am Zanib Mai and I am a proud member of the Bhulan Saheli group. I feel a deep connection to the dolphins and the well-being of our river's ecosystem. When I look back on my childhood, I remember a time when the dolphins used to playfully interact with our boats, and the river was pure and serene, without pollution and noise. A remarkable incident from my childhood created an unbreakable bond between myself and the dolphins. I fell into the river from my boat, but a dolphin quickly came to my rescue and gently guided me back to safety. This unforgettable event made me see the dolphins as my sisters.

Ever since this life-saving encounter, I have dedicated myself to reciprocating the care and protection I received from the dolphins during my time of need. I want to welcome them back to our boats, just like they did for me, and nurture and safeguard them. This strong desire drives me to advocate for awareness and conservation, not only for dolphins but also for freshwater turtles and other endangered species. I actively engage with the women in my community, sharing my personal story and encouraging them to take part in conservation programmes. I stress the importance of preserving our natural habitat and wildlife, especially the dolphins, by attending and promoting awareness sessions organized by the WWF-Pakistan field team.

My dedication goes beyond my own involvement, I want to inspire and empower others, especially women, to join hands in this crucial conservation effort. Through the Bhulan Dost programme, I educate my community about the dangers of using harmful chemicals and electric currents in fishing practices. I advocate for sustainable fishing methods to ensure the safety and preservation of these cherished creatures.

Thanks to my unwavering efforts, I have succeeded in nurturing a collective concern within my community for the well-being and conservation of these remarkable river inhabitants. My story is a beacon of hope, encouraging responsible practices and fostering a newfound sense of responsibility among my community members. Together, we can make a positive change for our river and its precious creatures.

