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International Experts Convene in Kratie to Strengthen Irrawaddy Dolphin Conservation Following Mekong Dolphin Swim

24 March 2025, Kratie, Cambodia – Government officials, conservation experts and international partners have gathered in Kratie Provincial Town for a two-day International Expert Workshop on the Management and Conservation of Irrawaddy Dolphins in the Mekong River. This event marks a significant step in protecting one of the world's most endangered freshwater dolphin populations.

The Mekong Irrawaddy dolphin population remains critically endangered, with fewer than 100 adult individuals estimated to survive today. Despite ongoing conservation efforts, key threats such as gillnet entanglement and habitat degradation continue to put their future at risk.

Alongside government and NGO partners, WWF-Cambodia brought attention to this dolphin population's vulnerability through the Mekong Dolphin Swim, a 120 km swimming relay down the Mekong River from Stung Treng to Kratie province between 17 and 20 March 2025. A team of conservations, including five swimmers and two kayakers, spent the four-day journey removing deadly gillnets, recording dolphin sightings and visiting riverside communities to inspire action for river dolphins. The initiative raised over US\$20,000 from worldwide donors to support WWF-Cambodia's River Guard Programme and research to mitigate dolphin deaths.

H.E. Sreng Sophea, Deputy Governor of Kratie Provincial Administration, stated: *"Last week, the Mekong Dolphin Swim made a remarkable contribution to dolphin conservation. Today's discussions provide vital recommendations to further strengthen conservation strategies for this species, which is considered Cambodia's national living treasure and a symbol of the Mekong River."*

For over two decades, WWF-Cambodia, in collaboration with the Fisheries Administration of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, Kratie and Stung Treng Provincial Administrations and local communities, has worked tirelessly to protect these dolphins. Conservation efforts have included habitat protection, enforcement of gillnet bans, capacity building for river guards and community engagement to promote sustainable fishing practices.

Mr. Chap Vibol, Country Director of WWF-Cambodia, emphasized the importance of science-driven conservation: *"Our research and monitoring efforts, including dolphin population assessments and behavioural studies, provide essential data to guide conservation policies. With international collaboration, we can implement stronger, science-based solutions to protect Mekong dolphins for future generations."*

The workshop brings together experts from leading institutions such as the Marine Mammal Commission, Sarasota Dolphin Research Program, Hydrobiology Institute of the Chinese Academy of Science and others. Discussions will focus on four key areas:

1. Strengthening collaboration among Cambodian institutions, international experts and fellow Irrawaddy dolphin range countries;
2. Advancing scientific population assessments to improve understanding of dolphin numbers and health;
3. Developing actionable recommendations for effective conservation strategies;
4. Securing sustainable funding to ensure long-term protection efforts.

At the workshop, Lenovo Group is also showcasing its AI-driven efforts in Yangtze finless porpoise conservation, announcing a partnership with the Wuhan Baiji Conservation Foundation. Guided by experts from the Chinese Academy of Sciences, the collaboration explores AI applications for global small cetacean research. Technology developed for porpoise conservation is now being adapted to protect Cambodia's Mekong Irrawaddy dolphins.

Dr. Frances Gulland, Chair of the U.S. Marine Mammal Commission, says, "We must work together to support and collaborate with local communities in their passionate efforts to protect nature and conserve wildlife. While we are aware of some challenges, others remain uncertain. Dolphin mortality is a concern that demands our continued attention. We hope to strengthen our efforts through ongoing support, strategic collaboration and sustainable financial investment. Moving forward, our focus will remain on technical assistance, effective partnerships and long-term solutions to safeguard these iconic species."

The outcomes of this workshop will help shape Cambodia's long-term Irrawaddy dolphin conservation strategy. Through continued government leadership, scientific expertise and community engagement, there is hope for a future where Mekong dolphins can thrive.

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