

2007 Whitley Gold Award Winner

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Fernando Trujillo, Colombia

River dolphins as flagship-species for fishery management and habitat conservation in the Amazon basin

The issue:

River dolphins are amongst the world's most endangered cetaceans. Virtually wiped out in Asia, South America's rivers present the best chance for ongoing freshwater dolphin survival. However, here too dolphins are persecuted, accidentally caught in nets and affected by water pollution. Recent studies show the Pink River Dolphins endemic to the Amazon and Orinoco river basins face a new threat – they are being deliberately killed for use as fishing bait for Colombia's catfish market. The situation is a dramatic example of unsustainable fishing practices that threaten two of the largest river systems in the world.

Pink River Dolphins share their habitat with a high-density human population reliant on the river for water, food and transport. Over-fishing is one issue, but throughout the Amazon and Orinoco basins there is also increasing dam construction, deforestation and pollution, all of which also reduces fish numbers at a time when demand for fish is increasing. Fishermen are resorting to non-traditional practices including driftnets, electric devices and explosives. These methods kill and maim dolphins and other wildlife indiscriminately and threaten the food security of local people.

Traditionally dolphins were spared

persecution because of cultural beliefs. Riverside communities tell tales of women impregnated by dolphins or how each dolphin is an incarnation of a man. Today, however, these beliefs are being eroded and management policies that reduce pressure in the most disturbed areas are urgently needed for the benefit of both people and dolphins.

The project work:

Winner of the 2007 Whitley Gold Award, Fernando Trujillo (pictured above) has studied the river dolphins of South America for over 20 years. With his team at Foundation Omacha, Fernando has produced valuable information on dolphin habitat use, abundance and behaviour, and identified the main threats to river ecosystems. His work has highlighted the growing conflict evident between river dolphins and commercial fishermen. Growing numbers of fishermen claim dolphins steal fish from their nets and reduce fish stocks. By working closely with fishermen, and involving them in scientific research, Fernando is showing dolphins are present in less than 8% of the areas fished, and that the main threat to fisheries is the activities of people



themselves. In some areas, fishing pressure has resulted in a permanent reduction in the size of fish as well as the local extinction of large catfishes. By understanding that the presence of a dolphin indicates a healthy river, many fishermen are realising their future is closely linked to that of the dolphins, and that

fisheries can only recover with improved river management. Supported by a strong educational campaign raising awareness of why dolphins are important, the team is helping diversify local livelihoods and exploring economic alternatives for fishermen.

The future:

There are many challenges aside from overfishing. The dramatic deforestation being seen in the Amazon basin is well known, but few people are aware of the knock-on problems development is causing to the region's rivers. Pollution from oil spills, mercury washed into streams in gold mining operations, population pressure from migration into the region, and sedimentation caused by deforestation along the shore are just some of the serious problems which threaten the Amazon's arterial waterways. Despite this, governments are still not producing effective management protocols. Using the river dolphins as an flagship species, Fernando is leading a collaborative international effort involving the governments of Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia in an ambitious attempt to produce a coordinated approach to the region. A vital first step is already underway with support from IUCN to develop regional Action Plans to protect aquatic ecosystems in South America, combining research, education and economic alternatives for local people.



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Leader Profile:

Fernando is a Marine Biologist with a passion for cetaceans. Born in Bogota, Colombia, he obtained a Masters degree from Greenwich University, London, before completing his PhD in Zoology at Aberdeen University, Scotland. A world expert on river dolphins, in 1993, he established the Colombian NGO Foundation Omacha to promote conservation of river species and their ecosystems in South America through education and research. He leads a large team of conservationists who have since the 1990s worked to establish effective management initiatives to protect rivers. Fernando believes any strategy to introduce management practices in large rivers must link emblematic species such as the river dolphin with the economic activities of local people. He is President of the Latin-American Aquatic Mammal Society and Member of the Cetacean Specialist Group of the IUCN.

Key Threats & Objectives

Threats

- **Killing of dolphins for bait** – in Brazil, Peru and Colombia dolphins are killed for bait to catch scavenger ‘mota’ fish. The extent of this practice is unknown.
- **Conflict with fishermen** – dolphins are perceived as competitors by commercial fishermen, leading to retaliatory killings through shootings and use of poison.
- **River pollution** – Oils spills pollute the water and high concentrations of mercury is found in the tissue of Amazonian fish and mammals.
- **Lack of economic alternatives** – leading to ongoing harmful practices in aquatic environments



Objectives

- **Biological and social research** – in unison with researchers in five countries to understand river dolphin and fishery interactions and identify priority areas for river conservation.
- **Education and outreach** – to raise awareness of the importance of dolphins as indicators of healthy river ecosystems and potential ecotourism attractions, and stop the killing of dolphins for bait
- **Alternatives for communities** – work with local people to develop dolphin watching by training guides in Leticia and Puerto Nariño (Colombia) and promoting a



local market for certified dolphin-friendly catfish for sale to restaurants and hotels.

- **A South American River dolphin Action Plan** – to secure a coordinated approach to river dolphin conservation across South America

Collaborative Organisations

Colombian Ministry of the Environment
 WWF
 Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society
 Conservation International
 Corpoamazonia

Key Project Team Members

- Maria Claudia Diazgranados MSc**
Marine Biologist
- Catalina Gomez MSc**
Biologist and dolphin researcher (survey design & statistical analysis)
- Marcela Portocarrero Aya**
Endangered Species Program Coordinator

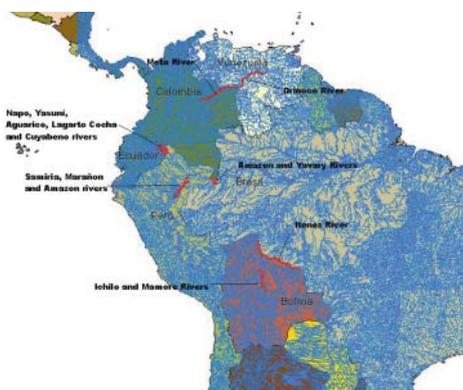
Project website

www.omacha.org



Location of Project

Place/Town Leticia and Puerto Nariño, Colombia and across South America
Region Amazon and Orinoco river basins
Country Colombia



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