

The status of “piracatinga” fishery using Amazon botos as bait in South America.

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ABSTRACT

The catfish (*Calophysus macropterus*) known mostly as “piracatinga” in Brazil and “mota”, “simi” or “mapurite” in Colombia, Peru and Venezuela, is a scavenger species largely consumed and recently commercially important in Colombia, mostly replacing another catfish known as “capaz” (*Pimelodus grosskopfii*) due to its over fishing. The catch of this species has increased over the last decade, becoming an important resource for export to Colombia, though a national market has been more recently developed in Brazil. The main concern regarding cetacean conservation is the apparently considerable high number of botos (*Inia geoffrensis*) illegally killed to be used as bait for “piracatinga” fishery, about 1,650 dolphins in only one area in the central Brazilian Amazon (da Silva & Martin, 2007). Efforts have been made in 2008 by governmental agencies and NGOs of Brazil and Colombia through two meetings held in each of these countries to update the status of this problem, to establish a collaborative agenda and to elaborate bi-national action and conservation plans to mitigate and hopefully stop this illegal hunting. The geographical occurrence of the fishery is largely spreading in the Brazilian Amazon, and it was also recorded in some rivers in Colombia, Peru and Venezuela. In the same way, the fish trade has expanded to as far as the Northeastern, Southeastern and Center-West (including the Federal Capital) regions of Brazil. The conservation scenarios discussed have included 1) improving the fishery statistics; 2) implementing adequate law enforcement plans for the illegal hunting of dolphins; 3) banning the fishing boxes, 4) developing alternative baits and chemical attractants to replace the use of botos; 5) as well as establishing an one-year “piracatinga” fishery moratorium in order to more appropriately regulate it later. The collaborative agenda between the two countries should also cover the search for adequate political involvement and funding as well as the participation of Peru and Venezuela.

KEYWORDS: AMAZON DOLPHIN, *INIA GEOFFRENSIS*, DIRECT CATCH, MANAGEMENT, ACTION AND CONSERVATION PLANS, MULTINATIONAL AGENDA.

The catfish (*Calophysus macropterus*) known mostly as “piracatinga” in Brazil and “mota”, “simi” or “mapurite” in Colombia, Peru and Venezuela, is a scavenger species largely consumed and recently commercially important in Colombia, mostly replacing another catfish known as “capaz” (*Pimelodus grosskopfii*) due to its over fishing.

The catch and commerce of “piracatinga” have increased over the last decade, becoming an important resource for export to Colombia, though a national market has been more recently developed in Brazil. The geographical occurrence of the fishery is largely spreading in the Brazilian Amazon, and it was also recorded in some rivers in Colombia, Peru and Venezuela. In the same way, the fish trade has expanded to as far as the Northeastern, Southeastern and Center-West (including the Federal Capital) regions of Brazil.

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There are specific legislation in Brazil to protect cetaceans, mostly the Federal Law 7.643 of 1987 forbidden the hunt and any form of intentional harassment of cetaceans and foreseeing fining and arresting. Therefore, action must be properly taken no matter the number of botos killed. However, several limitations such as personal and financial constraints as well as the lack of a coordinated or action plan has prevented appropriate measures. In order to address the later, efforts have been made in 2008 by governmental agencies and NGOs of Brazil and Colombia through two meetings held in each of these countries to update the status of this problem, to establish a

collaborative agenda and to elaborate bi-national action and conservation plans to mitigate and hopefully stop this illegal hunting.

During these meetings, various conservation scenarios have been discussed and a collaborative agenda was set for Brazilian and Colombian institutions.

An action plan was prepared for Brazil, which is available in Portuguese upon request. The main points regarding boto protection are to:

- 1) Implement adequate law enforcement plans for the illegal hunting of dolphins, with the cooperation of the Federal Police;
- 2) Ban the “piracatinga” fishing boxes as an important step of this law enforcement plan – the regulatory act draft is prepared and is under discussion with different stakeholders in both the Federal and States levels;
- 3) Develop alternative baits such as fish discards from fish markets and fish freezing plants as well as chemical attractive to replace the use of botos, as it has happened in Asia;
- 4) Establish a broad environmental awareness and outcome campaign, including the broadcast and local radio programmes which are extremely effective communication in the Amazon.
- 5) Establish one-year “piracatinga” fishery moratorium in order to more appropriately regulate it later;
- 6) Find and secure adequate funds from governmental and non-governmental institutions.

After the 59th IWC Scientific Meeting in 2007, Brazil has officially recognized the hunt of botos and has taken actions to minimise and eventually stop this illegal hunting. However, the extension and impact of this hunt it is wider than previously reported, as it was found out during the meetings held in Colombia, Brazil and Bolivia. Recognizing the hunting is now occurring in Colombia, Peru and Venezuela, cooperation and coordinated efforts must be taken among these countries. Existing laws protect botos in Brazil, Peru and Venezuela but not in Colombia and this is an important step to be achieved in the near future. Also recognizing the extension of boto hunt is likely unsustainable and spreading in Brazil, this is a key country to protect the species.

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