

Vikramshila Gangetic dolphin sanctuary

Research & Education Program for Conservation of Ganges River dolphins *Planista gangetica* in the Vikramshila Gangetic Dolphin Sanctuary, India

Location: River Ganges, Bihar, India

Species: - Gangetic river dolphin (*Platanista gangetica*)

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Conserving cetaceans (and other wildlife) is an ongoing process that can never be considered complete. Conservation measures that are already in force need to be evaluated and re-evaluated, and new approaches need to be developed to address threats that were unrecognized or non-existent until recently. According to 2002 – 2010 Conservation Action Plan for the World's Cetaceans, the main focus of the IUCN/ Cetacean Specialist Group has been on freshwater cetaceans. Moreover, the recent reported extinction of the Chinese river dolphin or Baiji *Lipotes vexillifer* has underlined the urgent need for the conservation of river dolphins, particularly *Platanista* dolphins across the world.

Vikramshila Biodiversity Research & Education Center, under Bhagalpur University, India and in collaboration with Whale & Dolphin Conservation Society initiated a project in 2001 that has been focused towards conserving Ganges river dolphins and other threatened aquatic wildlife in the Vikramshila Gangetic Dolphin Sanctuary (VGDS), the only protected area established in the world for protection and conservation of the Ganges river dolphins, an endangered obligate freshwater cetacean species endemic to the Ganges and Brahmaputra river systems in India. In addition to supporting a relatively high density of dolphins, the Sanctuary also supports a rich diversity of other wildlife, many of which are threatened with extinction. These species include the gharial, Indian smooth-coated otter, several species of hard- and soft-shell turtles, and an astounding variety of migratory and resident migratory birds.

Designation of the VGDS in 1991 was a welcome recognition by local authorities of the importance of conserving river dolphins, but no protective measures were instituted for a long time and until recently river stakeholders remained generally unaware of its existence.

Platanista river dolphins face many threats in the Vikramshila Sanctuary and those include competition with humans for food and water resources, physical alteration, degradation and loss of habitats, deliberate killing for dolphin products such as meat and oil, and collision with powered vessels. These dolphins are also threatened by the enormous pollutant load of the river affecting the immune and reproductive system



There are very few good photographs of the Gangetic river dolphin . Murky waters and the animal's high surfacing speed conspire to make photography extremely challenging.

adversely and by destructive fishing activities, which results in high mortality from by-catch and reduced availability of prey. These animals are perhaps more

“...the only protected area established in the world for protection and conservation of the Ganges river dolphins...”

vulnerable to these threats because their habitat requirements often place them in areas where human activities are most intense.

Establishing an effective wildlife sanctuary in Vikramshila is a challenging task. This is especially true in a dynamic environment such as the Ganges

River, where flood cycles cause massive changes in the landscape, both seasonally and annually. The challenge is also great because resources within the Sanctuary support one of the world's most economically impoverished human populations. The ongoing conservation project in the VGDS, conducted by VBREC in collaboration with WDCS, has been successful in generating baseline information about the Ganges river dolphins and other aquatic wildlife present in the Sanctuary and their abundance, habitat use and in identifying the threats to the wildlife. VBREC has also conducted a variety of education and awareness programmes to make people aware about the need and importance of conserving the dolphins and other wildlife in the Sanctuary. The present project has highlighted the Ganges river dolphins as the 'flagship species' of the River Ganges. Both, the dolphins and humans need healthy river for their sustenance. Hence, the protection of dolphins and the welfare of the people are two sides of the same coin, and are very much interrelated.



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