

Irrawaddy Dolphin

Orcaella brevirostris

CoP13 Prop. 3 (Thailand) Transfer from Appendix II to Appendix I of the Irrawaddy dolphin (*Orcaella brevirostris*)

SSN VIEW: SUPPORT ADOPTION OF PROPOSAL

- Several geographically isolated populations of Irrawaddy dolphins face an extremely high risk of extinction in the near future. The Mahakam River population is listed as Critically Endangered in IUCN's 2003 Red List of Threatened Species, and populations in Songkhla Lake, Malampaya Sound and the Ayeyarwady and Mekong rivers are to be listed as Critically Endangered in the 2004 Red List.
- The Irrawaddy dolphin is threatened throughout its range by incidental catches, primarily in gillnets, and in several areas by habitat degradation and capture for captive display.
- Irrawaddy dolphin populations are constrained by narrow habitat requirements – deep pools of large rivers and nearshore marine environments (including appended lakes) with substantial freshwater inputs – which puts them at increased risk of population extirpation from intensive development and human use.
- The demand for captive cetaceans in Asia is rapidly increasing and the removal (legal or illegal) of even a few individuals could lead to the extirpation of one or more Critically Endangered populations. More seriously, removals take place in the absence of any credible abundance estimate upon which a valid non-detriment finding could be based.
- The absence of adequate trade controls on this species creates incentives for live-captures for international trade that undermine and discourage conservation efforts by local people and governments. By removing this threat, Appendix I listing will protect gains made through other conservation measures (e.g., eliminating or reducing the use of gillnets) and may increase the willingness of local peoples and governments to undertake such measures.
- The Scientific Committee of the International Whaling Commission concluded in July 2004 that the proposal is consistent with its assessment, in 2000, of the species' "precarious conservation status", and recommended that "all direct removals should cease until affected populations have been assessed using acceptable scientific practices".

THE IRRAWADDY DOLPHIN MEETS THE BIOLOGICAL CRITERIA IN ANNEX 1 TO RESOLUTION CONF. 9.24

Ongoing declines in the number of wild individuals have been observed in some populations. In other populations, such declines are inferred or projected on the basis of habitat loss and degradation, coastal development, and other threats such as bycatch in fishing gears. The species is particularly vulnerable due to its naturally restricted and fragmented distribution. Further declines in range and population sizes are predicted in the face of increasing threats.

“Critically Endangered” populations

Several geographically isolated populations are very small. In addition to the Mahakam River population, currently listed as Critically Endangered, the Ayeyarwady, Mekong, Malampaya and Songkhla populations will be classified as Critically Endangered in the IUCN 2004 Red List. These classifications were based on a determination that each population contains fewer than 50 reproductively mature individuals, in which continuing population declines are projected, based on known and potential threats.

Unsustainable mortality

Probable declines in the number of individuals can be inferred for several populations based on unsustainable rates of removal. For Malampaya Sound, using a minimum estimate of two dolphins killed per year, removals represent 2.6% of the population, according to the best estimate of abundance of 77 dolphins. For the Mekong River, using an estimate of four deaths per year as the annual incidental catch rate, this represents 5.8% of the population, according to the best estimate of abundance of 69 dolphins. The Mahakam population has been subject to a mean annual mortality rate of greater than 10% in recent years. In Songkhla Lake, circumstantial evidence indicates declining numbers, as evidenced by the large number of recorded deaths (43 between January 1990 and December 2003) and its extremely low but precisely unknown population size. In the Ayeyarwady River, the density of gillnets was recorded as much higher in areas where the dolphins were previously known to occur but are now absent. Considering that the small sizes of these populations already make them vulnerable to extirpation from demographic variability, inbreeding depression and catastrophic environmental and epizootic events, the current rate of removals will almost certainly lead to their extirpation in the near future.

IRRAWADDY DOLPHINS ARE OR MAY BE AFFECTED BY TRADE

Although past international trade has been low (Thailand exported seven live specimens to Japan in 1995 and four to Singapore in 1999), the Irrawaddy dolphin meets the definition for a species that "is or may be affected by trade" according to CITES Resolution Conf. 9.24 since "there is a potential international demand for specimens". This is due to the extremely rapid proliferation of dolphinariums in Southeast Asia and the desirability of the species for entertainment displays. Even low levels of international trade could be decisive in causing the extinction of a Critically Endangered population of the species.

THREATS FACED BY THE SPECIES

Gillnet entanglement is the dominant threat to the species throughout its range. Other factors known or believed to be affecting one or more populations include: electric fishing, which uses high-voltage probes to kill or stun fish (and sometimes dolphins) indiscriminately; damming; channel blasting (for navigation purposes) and gold mining, which cause major changes in the geomorphologic and hydraulic features that support dolphins in rivers; and capture for the international trade in dolphinarium specimens.

Removal for live display

A growing threat to the species is removals from the wild to stock dolphinariums. Demand for captive cetaceans in Asia is high and rapidly increasing. More than 80 dolphin display facilities exist in at least nine Asian countries, with a large number of additional facilities planned. The charismatic appearance of Irrawaddy dolphins and their behavioural characteristics (e.g. spitting water, spy-hopping, fluke-slapping, etc.) make them especially attractive for shows and display. The IUCN 2002-2010 Action Plan for the World's Cetaceans notes that live-capture activities involving Irrawaddy dolphins have taken place in recent years "without adequate assessment of the wild populations and with little or no public disclosure of the numbers taken".

Although no credible abundance estimate exists for any population of this species that would indicate a sufficient number of animals to justify deliberate removals, at least 22 live Irrawaddy dolphins were taken from the Mahakam River system in Indonesia between 1974 and 1984. In 1994 and 2002, a total of 16 Irrawaddy dolphins were captured in Cambodia for export to Thailand or to stock local displays. Since the mid-1980s, an unknown number of dolphins have also been taken from the coastal waters of Thailand. Removal of live cetaceans from the wild is equivalent to incidental or deliberate killing, as the animals brought into captivity (or killed during capture operations) are no longer available to help maintain their populations. Because of the critical status and extreme biological vulnerability of the species, removal of even a few individuals (legally or illegally) could result in the rapid extirpation of Critically Endangered populations.

Trade affecting specific populations is impossible to monitor

Irrawaddy dolphins from Critically Endangered populations in Songkhla Lake, Malampaya Sound and the Mekong, Mahakam, and Ayeyarwady rivers cannot be reliably differentiated from animals belonging to other populations that may have larger numbers of individuals. The difficulty of identifying the source population of individual Irrawaddy dolphins once they are on display at a facility, and the loosely regulated and poorly documented nature of most live captures, mean that trade is almost impossible to monitor.

SUPPORT FOR IRRAWADDY DOLPHIN PROTECTION

Five geographically isolated populations are or soon will be classified as Critically Endangered in the IUCN Red List. Transferring the species from CITES Appendix II to Appendix I would allow conservationists and resource managers to focus their attention on the problems posed by fishery bycatch and habitat degradation. The economic sacrifices and government expenditures needed to address these threats are more difficult to justify if conservation measures can be undermined and populations potentially extirpated by a single live-capture event (legal or illegal) motivated by the demand for international trade. The Scientific Committee of the International Whaling Commission supported the proposal in July 2004.