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Mekong River Dolphins

Symbols of River Health

One of the highlights of the Mekong Discovery Trail is the chance to view the Mekong River Dolphin. These freshwater dolphins are one of the most threatened mammals in the world.

Around 100 dolphins rely on the nine deep pools along the Mekong between Kratie and the Laos border. Healthy river systems and responsible tourism are important for their survival.

Hidden Beneath the Surface
Hidden beneath the surface of the Mekong are the dolphins. They are the most threatened mammals in the world. They are the most threatened mammals in the world. They are the most threatened mammals in the world.

Discovery
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The Alarm Bells are Ringing People are Responding
Experts recognise the need for action and that conservation consider the views of all affected parties. Non Government Organisations (NGOs) are continuing important research and working with local communities to raise awareness of conservation. The development of alternative food production and livelihood programmes will help to alleviate poverty and reduce dependence on fishing. In time, this will reduce pressure on dolphin populations.

In a boat, please:

- approach at slow speed, and avoid getting closer than 100m using the motor
- do not feed or swim with the dolphins
- ensure that dolphins are not 'chased' or harassed and that adults are not separated from their calves
- avoid excessive noise or any activity likely to disturb the dolphins
- report any injured dolphin or inappropriate behaviour to researchers and authorities.

Dolphin Viewing Areas along the Mekong Discovery Trail

Anlong Svay	Damrei Phong
Kampi	Koh Phdau

Photo courtesy of WWF

Authorities
Fisheries Administration
Tel: 021 215 470
www.mafp.gov.la/mekong_fa.html

Non Government Organisations
Conservation Fund Development Trust
Tel: 021 957 230
Website: www.cfd.org.la
Mekong Working Group (Mekong Trust)
Tel: 021 214 400
www.mekong.org

Non Government Research Organisation
WWF Greater Mekong
Cambodia Country Program
Tel: 023 218 004
www.gmp.org/cambodia

mekong

IRRIWADDY DOLPHINS

The scientific name for this species is *Orcaella brevirostris*. The name brevirostris comes from the Latin meaning short-beaked. Overall, the dolphins' colour is

grey to dark slate blue. The dorsal fin is small and rounded behind the middle of the back. The forehead is high and rounded and the beak is lacking. They have broad and rounded flippers. It is not a true river dolphin,

but an oceanic dolphin that lives in brackish water near coasts, river mouths and in estuaries. It has established subpopulations in the Mekong. The five subpopulations vary in size from 10s-100 and are vulnerable.

ECOTOURISM (2)



FOR WHO IS ECOTOURISM

Basically everyone can be an ecotourist. It appeals to a wide range of travelers, of ages and interests. Travelers who choose ecotourism are responsible consumers interested in sustainability & authentic local experiences. They have the opportunity to give back something to the communities they visit.

This news letter is the last part of a two serie edition about ecotourism. Whereas the first edition focussed on the question "what is ecotourism?" - this edition will give you an example of a project I visited in Cambodia: The Irrawaddy Dolphin conservation project.

The Irrawaddy Dolphin Project

This dolphin species, *Orcaella brevirostris*, is a [vulnerable](#) species, but the subpopulations in the Mekong River are critically endangered with 5 populations still declining. It is possible to see this species in their natural habitat: the Mekong River.

The government has set up an ecotourism programme which is called [The Mekong Discovery Trail](#). Tourists can take the tour boats to the dolphin population. All tourists, boats and boatmen are subjected to the guidelines (see dolphin viewing scorecard) and prohibits getting too close to the dolphins. Also important, your guide can tell you more about the threats and latest situation of the dolphins. The local boatmen were former fishermen in that area and can now earn their living by guiding tourists in the same waters. The rest of the money goes to the government to fund environmental education and maintenance of The Mekong Discovery Trail.

The threats

This species lives in estuarine and freshwater occurrence where also many threats from human activities occur. Threats include mortality from getting entangled in gillnets, vessel strikes, and habitat loss and degradation. Especially [sand dredging](#) near [Koh Kong](#) causes soil degradation of the river floor. Also it alters the river's ecosystem. Most of its habitat is destroyed by deforestation, mining and dams. Live captures for aquarium display also have been a conservation issue in some local areas. They have been hunted directly in the past in the Mekong River, but are revered by local people in many areas of Asia.

IUCN red list

The [IUCN red list](#) shows all threatened species. The scientific work groups conduct research on the Irrawaddy Dolphin to get more understanding of this species. You can [help](#) IUCN.

Have you thought about...

- considering ecotourism destinations such as The Mekong Discovery Trail?
- removing the filter of your extinguished cigaret before discarding it in nature?
- using a [water filter](#) to save plastic bottles?

Responsible Dolphin Watching
Score the quality of your dolphin viewing using the table below. Rare sights earn more points, but disturbing tours earn minus points. (50 = excellent dolphin viewing!)

Dolphin Viewing Scorecard			
We saw a dolphin's...		My boat...	
Dorsal fin	1	approached dolphins from behind and parallel with them	10
head	2	used paddles (not motor) within 100m	10
Back	4	approached dolphins from the front	-20
Tail	6	had noisy passengers	-20
Head and tail	10	herded dolphins into shallows	-20
Distant 'smile'	10	got closer than 100m using a motor	-20
Total		Total	

Dolphin Viewing Scorecard