



The Society for Marine Mammalogy

<http://www.marinemammalogy.org>

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Honourable Minister of State
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Dear Sir,

The Society for Marine Mammalogy expresses its deep concern about the catastrophic environmental impact that the implementation of India's National Waterways Bill 2015 would have on the survival of India's National Aquatic Animal, the Ganges River dolphin. The status of this species is of serious conservation concern, and it is listed as Endangered with extinction on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.

The Society for Marine Mammalogy is the world's largest professional group dedicated to the study of marine mammals, including river dolphins. We have a membership of approximately 2,000 scientists from 60 countries. Our goal is to facilitate the understanding and conservation of marine mammals and the ecosystems that support them. Members of the Society include some of the world's foremost river dolphin experts, including several scientists from India.

The Ganges River dolphin is one of very few freshwater dolphin species worldwide and it is already severely threatened by habitat loss from large-scale water development that has occurred in its range, especially in the upper Ganges. The proposed scale of development in the National Waterways Bill has strong potential to cause the extinction of the Ganges River dolphin from rivers in India through population fragmentation, habitat loss and degradation, pollution, noise, and boat strikes. Upstream changes to river hydrology will also have serious negative impacts on the downstream populations in Bangladesh. In a similar situation,

human impacts have caused the presumed extinction of another river dolphin, the Yangtze river dolphin in China. Although the primary concern of the Society for Marine Mammalogy is the impact of the National Waterways Bill on river dolphins, we are aware that its implementation also poses a threat to riverine fish species and other freshwater biodiversity.

We strongly recommend that, before waterway development begins, a thorough environmental review be conducted to assess the ecological impacts on the Ganges River dolphin. A partial list of priority considerations that should be assessed includes (i) altered hydrological regimes, especially declines in freshwater flow that would likely result in the loss of dolphin habitat and impacts on their preferred prey, (ii) the isolation of dolphin populations between barrages that are planned to be constructed every 100 km of river length, (iii) increases in vessel traffic that may result in increased boat collisions with dolphins and their displacement from critical habitat, and (iv) water pollution which will increase with higher large vessel traffic, particularly in light of plans to transport 300 million tons of coal through the waterways each year.

On behalf of the Society for Marine Mammalogy, I extend an offer to provide expert advice from our scientists for a review on the ecological impacts of the waterway development proposed in the National Waterways Bill. We appreciate your consideration of the incorporation of river dolphin conservation within all relevant development plans.

Sincerely,



Dr. Jay Barlow
Acting President, Society for Marine Mammalogy

cc.

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