

Mr Jairam Ramesh
Minister
Ministry of Environment and Forest
Government of India
Paryavaran Bhavan
CGO Complex
Lodhi Road
New Delhi
110 003
India

13 October 2010

Dear Minister,

Subject: Potential impacts of five large dams on the Endangered Gangetic dolphins in the Brahmaputra River Basin, India

On behalf of the IUCN Species Survival Commission (SSC), I write to congratulate you and the Government of India for your recent declaration of the Gangetic dolphin (*Platanista gangetica gangetica*) as the National Aquatic Animal of India. This action could not be more timely in view of the concerns in the conservation community about the potential impacts of dam construction on Gangetic dolphins in the Brahmaputra River and its tributaries. Similar to India's other National Animal, the tiger (*Panthera tigris*), the Gangetic dolphin is listed by IUCN as Endangered, and the Brahmaputra River Basin is one of its last remaining refuges.

A recent survey conducted by a member of the Cetacean Specialist Group of the IUCN SSC, Dr. Abdul Wakid, confirmed the existence of about 300 Gangetic dolphins in the Brahmaputra system. As you are aware, almost 170 dams are in the planning stages or are already under construction in the various tributaries and forerunners of the Brahmaputra River. Due to their location, five of these dams have great potential to harm the Gangetic dolphins living downstream. These are the Lower Subansiri Dam (already under construction), the Lower Siang Dam, the Dibang Dam, Lower Damwe Dam, and Kulsu Dam. Individually, these dams are likely to result in declines in the range and/or abundance of the Gangetic dolphin population. Together, they could have cumulative impacts leading to the complete disappearance of the species from the Brahmaputra River and its tributaries.

Knowing your strong commitment to conservation, I am sure that you are aware that studies conducted by the World Commission on Dams (<http://www.dams.org>) and numerous others have shown that large dams have profound and often irreversible environmental impacts. Their construction and operation cause major changes in the flow regime, sediment load, and water quality of rivers. Dams often cause erosion of downstream areas due to a reduction in the supply of sediment. Reduced sediment supply combined with changes in flow alters river morphology and hydrology, potentially degrading or even eliminating the preferred pool habitats of Gangetic dolphins. The extreme fluctuations in discharge associated with hydropower generation have been proven to reduce fish diversity, potentially causing dolphins to abandon the affected portions of rivers. The often dramatic negative impacts of dams on migratory and resident fish populations can also threaten the livelihoods of local fishermen.

The SSC stands ready to support you in your efforts to bring about the conservation and recovery of the Gangetic dolphin in India. In order to achieve a sustainable future for this remarkable species, especially in the Brahmaputra river system within North East India, we commend to you the following measures in relation to the plans for the construction and operation of the five dams listed above, before any such plans are approved by the Government of India:

- (1) a comprehensive environmental impact assessment be undertaken that explicitly includes potential downstream impacts on Gangetic dolphins of the five dams both individually and cumulatively;
- (2) a river basin approach be taken towards managing water development in the Brahmaputra Basin such that efforts to conserve Gangetic dolphins in one area are not undermined by dam construction in another area; and
- (3) if the anticipated impacts of one or more of the five dams are judged to be severe and cannot be reduced to acceptable levels, then the option of not constructing them should be considered.

The chairman of the IUCN SSC Cetacean Specialist Group, Dr. Randall Reeves, has assured me that members of his group are available to assist in your efforts to evaluate the potential impacts of these proposed dams on Gangetic dolphins.

Thank you very much for your attention to this matter. Please do not hesitate to contact me (e-mail: simon.stuart@iucn.org) or Dr. Reeves (e-mail: rreeves@okapis.ca) if you have any questions.

Sincerely yours,



Dr. Simon N. Stuart
Chair, IUCN Species Survival Commission

Copy of this letter to:

1. Dr Ashok Khosla, President, IUCN
2. Ms Aban Marker Kabraji, IUCN Asia Regional Director