

Progress on Small Cetacean Sub-Committee Task Teams 2019-2020

Prepared by L. Porter and F. Trujilo

Task Teams 2019-2020

The Task Team Initiative of the Small Cetacean Sub-Committee was established in 2015. A history of this intersessional group work and remit is presented separately (CC/68A/INFO/04). Currently there are three separate task teams; two ongoing and one newly established at SC68B. This paper is a summary of the activities of these task teams between 2019-2020.

The South Asian River Dolphin (Platanista gangetica) Task Team (SAR-TT)

Progress

The South Asian River Dolphin Task Team (SAR-TT) was formed in 2017 (IWC, 2018) to assess emerging issues from across the range of South Asian river dolphins (*Platanista gangetica*). South Asian river dolphin, currently comprising two sub-species, are threatened by loss of habitat and habitat alteration and degradation throughout their entire range (India, Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh). Several SC meetings have highlighted the severe threats this species faces and the establishment of a dedicated task team now provides the SC with an ongoing and focused approach that is able to better inform the IWC. The first in-person meeting of the SAR-TT was held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in July 2019 and was attended by research scientists from each range state as well as other experts in river dolphin research and conservation. The workshop aimed to identify:

- (1) information gaps and research priorities for *Platanista* populations;
- (2) research projects that require coordinated effort and sharing of expertise and develop a trans-national plan for coordinated research efforts; and
- (3) key threats across the entire range of the species and any region- or country-specific threats;

The workshop recognised the importance of communicating the results of the workshop to government agencies and other bodies concerned with wildlife conservation in freshwater systems (rivers and lakes) and several of its recommendations were focused directly at the relevant agencies within the range states.

Other than recommendations, several key points were noted during the workshop:

the taxonomy of the species requires revision and multiple lines of evidence supports the designation of the two currently recognised sub species as distinct species and;

more than 80% of the species range has already been altered by river flow regulation and construction projects with many more projects proposed or underway.

Thus, in the very near future, with changes in taxonomy likely being formally recognised, the likelihood of successful conservation outcomes for either species is poor. Discussion at SCC68B recognised the challenges the SAR-TT faced and applauded the teams hard work to date and commended them on the excellent workshop outputs provided to SC.

Recommendations

The workshop formulated nine recommendations, most of which identified research needs. All recommendations are provided herein for completeness, however, are ordered by relevance with regards to how the IWC SC, and CC, can provide direct support.

- (1) As a priority and with data currently available, the level of dolphin bycatch throughout the species' range is assessed and its impact on local populations is evaluated. From the outcomes of this assessment, recommendations are provided for future monitoring and actions to mitigate impacts, ranging from technical changes to the revision of fisheries policies.

Some SAR-TT members are already in discussion with the IWC Bycatch Mitigation (BMI) coordinator to progress on this assessment

- (2) Pingers are assessed as an effective tool, both to minimise bycatch and to reduce the risk of dolphins becoming stranded in canals.

This is a proposed pilot project for the BMI.

- (3) Assessment is undertaken of the extent of targeted take and the use of dolphins for oil or fishbait and as wildmeat, particularly in India and Bangladesh, by involving social and ecological scientists – as part of co-ordinated survey actions listed in these recommendations.

The use of dolphins as aquatic wildmeat is a priority topic of SM and in 2020, a series of workshops on this topic concluded. The intersessional group focusing on this topic will coordinate with the SAR-TT how best to undertake the proposed assessment and, if required, find support to conduct the study.

- (4) All existing survey methods in use for population estimation are reviewed, and a decision system prepared to guide monitoring agencies and conservationists to identify and implement statistically robust and optimal survey methods based on river conditions and available survey resources.

This is potentially a recommendation that AIS might assist with, if an independent review of survey methodology was required. Noting that for IWC to endorse population estimates, any new or unified methodology requires review by this sub-committee.

- (5) By 2022, all range states identify key sections of national habitat that should be surveyed every five years, so that population trends can be monitored. Methodology should be replicated in each identified habitat but need not be standardised throughout the range, as different habitats require different methodological adaptations.
- (6) Starting from 2020, surveys to establish population size are initiated as early as possible in the Padma, Jamuna and Meghna mainstems and tributary networks (excluding the Bangladesh Sundarbans), Bangladesh and the Budhi Gandak, Baghmata, Rapti and Mahananda, India.
- (7) The review of Platanista taxonomy is completed and published.
- (8) As a priority, studies are conducted to better understand movements of dolphins across barrages in all countries and the extent of population connectivity and impacts on dolphin populations in fragmented riverine habitats are quantified.
- (9) A feasibility study is conducted to assess areas and methods to translocate Indus River dolphins (WWF-Pakistan) and to adapt existing marine mammal translocation initiatives specifically for river dolphins (co-ordinated by the Society for Marine Mammalogy and IUCN).

Following discussion at SC68B, it was noted that the management of protected areas and the strengthening of fisheries legislation would broaden the SAR-TT and it was suggested that by expanding the existing membership of the SAR-TT to include experts from other, relevant fields may achieve this aim. Following SC68B, several additional experts were invited to join the SAR-TT with the intention of better tackling the issues identified by the 2019 workshop. As such, the SAR-TT now comprises 16 members from each of the four range states, including several NGO's and scientists from different backgrounds.

Workplan

The SAR-TT will work towards fulfilling the recommendations of the workshop and expand their remit to include both assessing emerging issues and to establishing collaborations with other disciplines, e.g., MPA and Fisheries legislation experts, to better recommend solutions to identified problems. Both the BMI and the ICG on Wildmeat will work with the SAR-TT intersessionally to support specific recommendations from the workshop report. The SAR-TT will report to the TT Chair intersessionally and provide a progress report to the SC in 2021. It is noted that the work of SAR-TT can contribute to CMS Concerted Action on River Dolphins and collaboration with CMS was encouraged.

The Africa-Focused Sousa Task Team (AFS-TT)

Progress

The Africa-Focused *Sousa* Task Team (AFS-TT) was established in early 2020. This followed the pre-meeting workshop which highlighted, yet again, the severity of the conservation status of both species of *Sousa* that occur on Africa's west coast. Given the plethora of recommendations made by this SC in the last two decades on African *Sousa*, the focus of this task team is to develop a comprehensive framework of conservation actions to facilitate and co-ordinate SC recommendations. The AFS-TT comprises 35 members from 14 African countries, most of whom are nationals of or are permanently based in an African country in addition to some international experts who have a long history of working in Africa. This is the largest task team established to date and presents challenges both due to the magnitude of the problems *Sousa* face in Africa and the size geographical reach of the team itself. One online meeting of nearly all members was held prior to SC68B and it was agreed that to work more efficiently, the task team should initially divide into three working groups focusing on (1) *Sousa teuszii*, (2) *Sousa plumbea* and (3) bycatch.

Recommendations

As yet, the AFS-TT has not made any recommendations as the team is still establishing its work process. Currently, each working group is forming its structure and it is anticipated that conveners and co-conveners will be announced as soon as current circumstances allow.

Workplan

Review and consolidate current IWC recommendations on African *Sousa* and start to develop an action plan for IWC SC to implement. It was noted both in the AFS-TT and at SC68B that a parallel consortium of researchers, most of who are members of AFS-TT, are working towards filling knowledge gaps and developing a comprehensive action plan for *Sousa teuszii*. Further, there is a CMS Concerted Action on *Sousa teuszii*. Given the overlap of these groups aims with the AFS-TT, it is planned to develop synergies where possible in the knowledge that the *Sousa* issue in Africa is both extremely challenging and widespread and will require multiple approaches to resolve successfully.

The Lahille's Dolphin Task Team

Progress

The Lahille's Bottlenose dolphin subspecies (*Tursiops truncatus gephyreus*) was first highlighted at SC during the taxonomic review of the genus *Tursiops* (2015-2017). Only two small populations of this subspecies exist and due to the low number of individuals and evidence of dramatic decline in parts of its range, it was classified as 'Vulnerable' on the IUCN Red List in 2019. Thus, a Lahille's Dolphin Task Team was proposed at SC68B to initiate, guide and coordinate the implementation of conservation strategies for sub-populations in southern Brazil and Uruguay and to further the investigation of causes of population declines in Argentina and Uruguay. The task team has two members, one from one range state and an international expert, and is actively seeking to identify additional members, including members of the Franciscana ICG with whom work will be coordinated, given the potential overlap in population range and issues. The task team will aim to:

Recommendations

As a focus for initial work, the SC recommended that the task team aim to:

- (1) coordinate regional efforts among Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil and,
- (2) seek ways to work cooperatively with fishing communities and fisheries authorities to reduce bycatch.

Workplan

The Lahille's Dolphin Task Team will report to the TT Chair intersessionally and will provide a detailed work plan to the SC in 2021, if not before.