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**Expansion of Araguaia River Dolphin (*Inia araguaiaensis*) Feeding Tourism on the Tocantins River**

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## **Expansion of Araguaia River Dolphin (*Inia araguaiaensis*) Feeding Tourism on the Tocantins River**

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### **Abstract**

The interaction between humans and cetaceans, along with their tourism potential as an economically viable and environmentally sustainable activity, is a global issue encompassing various legal, animal welfare, and species conservation aspects, whether threatened or not by extinction. Cetacean feeding and observation tourism, whether on boats or at fixed points on land, have been rapidly growing in Brazil. However, this activity, while promising in terms of tourism, requires regulation and control to avoid negative impacts on cetacean individuals and populations, whether migratory or resident.

This work aims to highlight and discuss the sustainability, risks, and implications of river dolphin interaction tourism, which offers tour packages for direct interaction with these animals widely available on the internet, particularly with the Araguaia River Dolphin (*Inia araguaiaensis*), which has experienced rapid growth in the Tocantins River region.

**Keywords:** Amazon river dolphins, feeding tourism, threats, animal welfare.

### About Dolphin Tourism in the Amazon

Touristic interaction with dolphins in Brazil originated and spread in Lower Rio Negro with the use of groups and individuals of *Inia geoffrensis*, a species present throughout the entire Amazon River basin in Brazil (Best & da Silva, 1993). However, in recent years, this activity has been documented with the so-called Araguaia Dolphins, *Inia araguaiaensis*, a species described in 2014 and found only in the Araguaia-Tocantins basin. Initially, the Araguaia Dolphin was not recognized as a distinct species, but DNA analyses demonstrated significant differences, thus validating its classification as a unique species (Hrbek et al. 2014,).

Dolphin feeding tourism has been recorded since 1998 in the municipality of Novo Airão/AM, at a port in the city's urban area at the time, where the animals were fed and in physical contact with humans, conditioned to this feeding (Alves et al., 2011). This lucrative activity quickly replaced the sale of food and beverages that previously took place at the site.

Currently, this activity takes place on floating structures located in Novo Airão/AM (PARNA Anavilhanas), Iranduba/AM (two points on the Rio Negro), Manaus/AM (Rio Negro), and Borba/AM (RDS Igapó Açú) (Alves et al., 2013), as well as two new points of interaction with *Inia araguaiaensis* in the municipalities of Mocajuba/PA and Cameté/PA, on the banks of the Tocantins River.

It is not difficult to find images and advertisements on the internet and social media that show this activity, which includes the manipulation of animals by tourists on a submerged platform while being fed by tourism professionals.

In the case of the Tocantins River, interactions with groups of *Inia araguaiaensis* in the municipalities of Mocajuba/PA and Cametá/PA, although they have been occurring for some time with the feeding of animals with leftovers from the fish markets of the respective cities, have gained a tourist connotation in recent years. In Mocajuba, the city hall even built a mirante-type physical structure exclusively for observing the dolphins that are fed there, and plans are underway for a new and large structure for this activity.

However, this activity on the Tocantins River has resulted in reports to Brazilian environmental authorities (IBAMA). During an inspection at the site, it was found that feeding and interaction with the animals are carried out without any regulation, with heavy boat traffic very close to the animals, including juveniles.

Currently, the activity in Mocajuba generates financial income only from attracting tourists who buy fish from the municipal market and offer them directly to the dolphins, either by hand or with lines. There is no control over the quality of the fish offered or the timing of the supply. Research groups have been working on-site to assess the effects of these interactions on the feeding behavior, and health condition of the animals.



1- Image of the dolphin viewpoint in Mocajuba/PA where the tourist activity takes place (IBAMA image)



2- Trapiche de Mocajuba/PA, with researchers and community members disembarking, all together and a large number of vessels traveling (IBAMA image).



3- Image of a dolphin fed in Mocajuba with a lesion in the mouth, possibly caused by a hook (image /IDEFLORBIO).



4- Image of a boto with partial loss of the jaw in Cameté / PA (Image/IDEFLORBIO)

## **Discussion**

Although cetacean sighting and interaction tourism is considered a potentially sustainable and beneficial activity for the conservation of the species involved, it is undeniable that its uncontrolled execution may represent a threat, not only to the individuals involved but also to the conservation of the species as a whole. Alves et al. (2011) highlighted in their study on the growth of dolphin feeding tourism that this practice entails significant risks for both animals and tourists. If not properly managed, there is a risk of accidents, injuries, and even fatalities.

Artificial feeding of dolphins as a tourist activity, if conducted responsibly and sustainably, can generate financial benefits and contribute to environmental conservation, especially in Protected Areas with continuous monitoring (Vidal et al.,2022). However, the rapid and disorderly growth of this activity in the Amazon puts at risk groups and even entire populations of animals.

As highlighted by Orams (1996, 2002), the provision of food to wild animals has several negative consequences, including behavioral changes and dependence on the supplied food, both at the individual and population levels (Frias 2014). Additionally, animals are subjected to greater risks of accidents and health deterioration due to adverse

environmental conditions, such as pollution and presence of waste, in addition to intense boat traffic.

Animals conditioned and fed in areas like the Tocantins River exhibit scars, amputations, and oral lesions, resulting from the interactions and heavy boat traffic. Direct interaction between humans and cetaceans, without adequate regulation and effective control, poses a high risk of injuries to animals and tourists themselves. This model of interaction is being replicated in other South American countries, reproducing negative aspects of such kind of interaction with critical injuries already reported.

Another concerning aspect is the possibility of zoonotic disease transmission due to the proximity between dolphins and tourists. Therefore, dolphin feeding tourism on the Tocantins River, if not controlled by environmental authorities with clear recommendation of responsible practices to be adopted, may represent an additional threat to *Inia araguaiaensis* populations.

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