**South Asian River Dolphin**

Scientific Name: *Platanista gangetica*

What?

The **South Asian river dolphin** (*Platanista gangetica*), also known as the blind river dolphin, Ganges river dolphin, Ganges susu, Ganges dolphin, and Indus river dolphin, is an endangered freshwater or river dolphin found in the region of the Indian subcontinent. They are comprised of two subspecies:

* Ganges River Dolphins (*Platanista gangetica gangetica*)
* Indus River Dolphins (*Platanista gangetica minor*)

From the 1970s until 1998, they were regarded as separate species; however, in 1998, their classification was changed from two separate species to subspecies of a single species.

The Ganges river dolphin has been recognized by the government of India as it is National Aquatic Animal and is the official animal of the Indian city of Guwahati.

The Indus river dolphin has been named as the National Mammal of Pakistan.

South Asian river dolphins have many local names throughout the countries where they live. Most are related to the sound people hear when the dolphins surface to breathe. These include bhulan (Urdu and Sindhi); Sus and Swongsu (Nepali); Susu, Soonse, and Sunsar (Hindi); Hiho and Shihu (Assamese); and Shusshuk, Foomach and Sishumaach (Bengali).

Being a mammal, the Ganges river dolphin cannot breathe in the water and must surface every 30–120 seconds. Because of the sound it produces when breathing, the animal is popularly referred to as the *susu*. The Ganges river dolphin favors deep pools, eddy countercurrents located downstream of the convergence of rivers and of sharp meanders, and upstream and downstream of midchannel islands.

**What are South Asian river dolphins like?**

This greyish-brown dolphin has an unusual looking head and face; their teeny eyes are only visible as pin-prick sized openings just above the end of their upturned mouth line. The very long, slender snout is lined with lots of sharp, pointy teeth that get longer towards the tip and are visible on the outside of the mouth. The dorsal fin is more of a low hump and the belly is rounded which gives these dolphins a stocky appearance. The triangular-shaped flippers are large and broad; they are squared-off at the end and have a crenulated trailing edge. The tail flukes are also large and wide.

They are generally found alone or in pairs, and occasionally in small groups. They tend to gather in places along the river where the best fishing spots are; in counter-current pools created near channel convergences, mid-channel islands, sharp meanders, and man-made structures such as bridge pilings. These features help to concentrate nutrients and fish in the river.

Where?

The South Asian river dolphins are native to the freshwater river systems located in Nepal, India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. They can be most commonly found in water with a high abundance of prey and reduced flow. They migrate seasonally—downstream in colder conditions with lower water levels and upstream in warmer conditions with higher water levels.

The Ganges subspecies (*P. g. gangetica*) can be found along the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna and Karnaphuli-Sangu river systems of Bangladesh and India, and the Sapta Koshi and Karnali Rivers in Nepal. A small subpopulation may still be found on the Ghaghara River, but requires verification.

The Indus subspecies (*P. g. minor*) today only occurs in a 1,000-km stretch of the Indus River itself and several connecting channels between the Jinnah and Kotri barrages.

During high water seasons created by monsoon rains, South Asian river dolphins are able to spread out and live in seasonal tributaries and lakes as well as the main river channels.

Why?

Both subspecies have been adversely affected by human use of river systems in South Asia. Entanglement in fishing nets as bycatch can cause significant damage to local populations, and individuals are taken each year by hunters; their oil and meat are used as a liniment, as an aphrodisiac, and as bait for catfish. Poisoning of the water supply from industrial and agricultural chemicals may have also been a contributing factor towards population decline, as these chemicals are biomagnified in the bodies of the dolphins.Perhaps the most significant issue is the building of more than 50 dams along many rivers, causing the segregation of populations and a narrowed gene pool in which dolphins can breed.An immediate danger for the Ganges subspecies in National Chambal Sanctuary is the decrease in river depth and appearance of sand bars dividing the river course into smaller segments, as irrigation has lowered water levels throughout their range

They have also been classified as [endangered](https://www.iucnredlist.org/species/41758/50383612) since the 1970s. Their current population is estimated at only several hundred dolphins, a number unlikely to sustain the species, and one that will create genetic problems.

* Barrages and Dams

The biggest threat South Asian river dolphins face is the existence of dams and barrages altering rivers for human needs. These structures are insurmountable physical barriers to the dolphins and prevent their free movement and seasonal migration in rivers. They have reduced the complexity of natural river flow and ecosystems and reduced habitats available for the dolphins. The surviving dolphins are now divided into isolated and vulnerable subpopulations. Dolphins trapped upriver of some dams have already disappeared. More dams and barrages are under construction or planned, driven by higher demands for freshwater supplies for agriculture, industry, and urban areas and so South Asian river dolphin populations will continue to decline.

* Pollution

Levels of pollution in rivers of South Asia are increasing and can be expected to carry on increasing as development is ongoing and there are few controls on pollutant discharges. Rivers are less able to dilute pollutants because water is increasingly removed to supply agricultural and industry demands.

* Fishing nets

South Asian river dolphins get caught accidentally and die in gillnets. Both fishermen and dolphins fish in the same parts of the river where nutrients are richest and the fish are concentrated.

How?

A 2017 population assessment estimated less than 5,000 individuals for the species as a whole, of which about 3,500 belong to the Ganges subspecies and about 1,500 to the Indus subspecies. However, the underlying surveys are temporally patchy and believed to contain uncertainty. Current population trends are unclear. A demonstrable increase in the main river population of the Indus subspecies between 1974 and 2008 may have been driven by permanent immigration from upstream tributaries, where the species no longer occurs.

Ganges river dolphins are listed as [Endangered A2abcde](https://www.iucnredlist.org/species/41758/50383612) by the [IUCN Red List of Threatened Species](https://www.iucnredlist.org/) and [CITES-Appendix I](https://cites.org/).

ENDANGERED (EN) – A taxon is Endangered when the best available evidence indicates that it meets any of the criteria A to E for Endangered ([see Section V](https://portals.iucn.org/library/node/10315)), and it is therefore considered to be facing a very high risk of extinction in the wild.

International trade is prohibited by the listing of the South Asian river dolphin in Appendix I of the [Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Convention_on_International_Trade_in_Endangered_Species). It is protected under the Indian Wildlife Act, although these legislations require stricter enforcement. Both subspecies are listed by the [IUCN](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/IUCN) as endangered on their [Red List of Threatened Species](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Red_List_of_Threatened_Species). The Indus river dolphin is listed as endangered by the US government’s [National Marine Fisheries Service](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Marine_Fisheries_Service) under the [Endangered Species Act](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Endangered_Species_Act).

The species is listed on Appendix I and Appendix II of the [Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Convention_on_Migratory_Species).

The Ministry of Environment and Forest declared the Gangetic dolphin the national aquatic animal of India. A stretch of the Ganges River between Sultanganj and Kahlgaon in Bihar has been declared a dolphin sanctuary and named [Vikramshila Gangetic Dolphin Sanctuary](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vikramshila_Gangetic_Dolphin_Sanctuary), the first such protected area.

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| |  | | --- | | Life Expectancy | | 30 Years | | |  | | --- | | Estimated to be fewer than | | 5000 across Asia | |

References:

<https://uk.whales.org/whales-dolphins/species-guide/south-asian-river-dolphin/>

<https://www.worldwildlife.org/species/ganges-river-dolphin>

<https://marinebio.org/species/south-asian-river-dolphins/platanista-gangetica/>

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Wikipedia