

WWF- internship: Community-based fisheries regulations can save river dolphins from extinction

Background of WWF: the host organization for this research

WWF is an international organization for the protection of nature with the mission to stop the degradation of the planet's natural environment and to build a future in which Humans live in harmony with nature. The organization has independent offices in around 100 countries in the world forming a global network. There is a common worldwide strategy that focusses on the conservation of the biodiversity on the planet and the reduction of the global footprint to a level that is within the limits of the earth. WWF looks for solutions in cooperation with governments, companies and civil society to realize protection of species and their habitats and a sustainable use of environmental resources.

The research: background and research questions

WWF has a global river dolphin rivers initiative (RDRI), that is active in 13 countries in Asia and South America. The coordinator of this global program is based in the Netherlands.

All six river dolphin species in the world are classified by IUCN as Endangered or Critically Endangered. Asian river dolphin populations are small, some <250 individuals. Every deadly accident is weakening the population further, reducing the gene pool, increasing its vulnerability. While in South America the numbers are considerably higher, bycatch caused mortality is claimed to cost hundreds of dolphin lives yearly; other unsustainable fishing practices add to that figure.

The main cause of direct river dolphin mortality worldwide is entanglement in gillnets: being a mammal in need of breathing air, the incidentally caught dolphin drowns. Preventing individuals from getting themselves in this unfavorable situation is simply a life-saver.

But it is not only gillnets that harm river dolphin populations; other fishing practices like electrofishing do as well. And it is not only dolphins that suffer from unsustainable fishing practices: other aquatic species, like fish, otters and reptiles do; and people do, especially the riverine communities depending on this protein resource. Overfishing is becoming a severe threat to human food security: in all eight river basins where river dolphins live¹, scientific evidence shows a decrease in fish populations due to overfishing, among other factors.

By working together with the fishers, we believe we can create a future in which river dolphins and fishers live in harmony, both doing well.

Community-regulated fisheries tackle a shared threat between dolphin conservation and human welfare, putting the riverine communities at the core of the solution. By monitoring their fish catch over time, sharing this information and analyzing it, the communities agree between themselves on the quota per species, the fishing methods to be applied and the fishing periods, assuring a minimum fish size (only mature fishes reproduce), fish spawning, and migration. Although these agreements are always tailor-made, NGO's and academia/ fish experts can support the process, a.o. by establishing creating learning between communities.

Methodology

Literature research/document review/expert interviews/aggregating data

Gather and analyze all literature and experts on community-based inland fishery agreements in the eight river dolphin rivers, identifying Best Practices. Create an overview per RDRI country of ongoing activities, including by WWF, identifying gaps and scaling opportunities.

¹ Ayeyarwady (Myanmar), Amazon (6 countries), Ganges (Bangladesh, India, Nepal), Indus (Pakistan), Mahakam (Indonesia), Mekong (Cambodia, Laos), Orinoco (Colombia, Venezuela), Yangtze (China)

Student Profile We are looking for a master student., e.g. biology of social sciences with a good sense of logic, feeling comfortable working in an independent way, interviewing experts around the world and able to digest, summarize and analyze large amount of information. English is a must; Spanish a nice-to have.

Period As soon as possible

Allowance Students in NL achieve an allowance of €270,- per month on a full time basis

Information and Questions: contact your supervisor or Natascha Zwaal nzwaal@wwf.nl

Please send your CV and motivation letter to Natascha Zwaal and Daphne Willems, dwillems@wwf.nl