

Project Update: January 2003

We have now conducted a total of 3,116.69 km of boat survey over 269 hours throughout the upper reaches of the Mekong River. Boat surveys were undertaken in May 2002 – at the height of the dry season and January 2003. It is hoped that boat surveys will continue every month until May – the height of the dry season. In addition, interviews with local communities, photo-identification and capacity building amongst local Department of Fisheries officials have continued during the wet season (June-December) when boat surveys are logistically infeasible.

The Total Mekong River Irrawaddy dolphin population has now found to be even smaller than previously thought, with population estimates as low as 70-100 individuals. Accidental catch in gillnets is the primary cause of dolphin mortality in the river. During the past five months (as of January 2003) a total of four Irrawaddy dolphin carcasses had been recovered. Two were a direct result of by-catch and two were unknown causes (probably also by-catch). The situation is now critical for the Mekong River population, where the population is almost certainly facing extinction in the near future if conservation and management initiatives are not put in place immediately.

One of the posters produced and distributed for the education and awareness component of the project. The project is currently working with local communities and the Cambodian government to develop potentially effective and socially acceptable conservation strategies, which it is hoped can be put in place by the end of the year.

An additional primary aim of the project has also been to encourage capacity building of local Cambodian Department of Fisheries officials. One full time Department of Fisheries Counterpart and eight part-time counterparts have been trained in survey techniques and methodology and regularly assist with surveys, interviews and community discussions.

Although the future of the Mekong River Irrawaddy dolphin is precarious, thanks to support from funding agencies (primarily the Rufford Foundation), the logistical assistance of Wildlife Conservation Society – Cambodia program and support from Department of Fisheries, local government officials and local communities, there is still a good chance that the population can be conserved and managed for their long-term survival in the Mekong River.