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Exhibition on Whales and Dolphins Begins 'Save rare mammals of cetacean diversity'

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Dolphins have long been living in many of the rivers across the country, but the matter of sorrow is that the mammals, especially known for their intelligence, are not very familiar to the local people.

The presence of this rare animal called "Shushuk" in Bangladesh, of which the countrymen should be proud, however, is declining rapidly because of serious pollution in the rivers and killing due to lack of public awareness on the species.

Though dolphins and whales live in the water, they come above water for breathing, have temperature similar to what human beings have, but feed milk to their babies in water, said cetacean experts during the official opening of a first ever Dolphin Exhibition at Bangladesh Shishu Academy in the city yesterday.



Visitors at the first ever Dolphin Exhibition at Shishu Academy in the city yesterday. Bangladesh Cetacean Diversity Project (BCDP) organised the exhibition. Photo: STAR

The four-day exhibition titled 'Introducing whales and dolphins of Bangladesh' is being organised by Bangladesh Cetacean Diversity Project (BCDP) and sponsored by the Wildlife Conservation Society, a US-based NGO.

The exhibition, which opens from 9:30am to 8:30pm, includes photographs, films and games of whales and dolphins to create the feeling of pride in the visitors so that they come forward to help conserve the rare mammals of the country.

BCDP will also present the proposed "Protected Area Network for Cetacean Diversity," the goal of which is to conserve cetacean diversity in the country. Parallel to the exhibition, a series of seminar will also be held focusing on research and conservation efforts carried out in the country so far.

The most well-known dolphins in the country are the Ganges River Dolphins who have extraordinary long snouts, tiny dorsal fins and large flippers. They live throughout the Padma, Meghna, Jamuna, Karnaphuli and Sangu rivers.

Irrawaddy dolphins are found in rivers and in coastal waters that receive freshwater from rivers. They share habitat with the Gangetic dolphins in the waterways of the Sundarbans mangrove forest.

Indo-Pacific humpback dolphins and finless porpoises are occasional visitors to the mangrove forest but they live mostly in open coastal waters that receive freshwater flows from the Padma, Meghna and Jamuna rivers.

Spinner dolphins, Dan Tropical spotted dolphins and Indo-Pacific bottlenose dolphins are also the species living in the sea areas of the country. But, all these are today endangered.

Elizabeth Mansur of BCDP said, "Man needs fish to get protein and dolphins and whales also need the same. But, when they got caught in fishing nets, they cannot breath and consequently die. If we continue to kill them, these beautiful animals will extinct soon."

The good news for Bangladesh, however, is that a study identified a 120-kilometre belt of estuarine, coastal and pelagic waters in Bangladesh that extends across the Sundarbans and offshore to a 900-plus metre deep

undersea canyon as a hotspot of global cetacean diversity and abundance.

"This means the rivers and coastal river bodies are used as various species of dolphins, and even whales. The number of them is even more than that of the other Asian countries," according to a paper distributed to newsmen at the programme.

"I had an idea of setting up a dolphin corner in Dhaka Zoo, but later I was later convinced that it is such an animal that should be left in its own habitat -- the rivers and the sea," said Water Resources Adviser Dr CS Karim, while speaking as the chief guest at the programme.

Dr Karim said he saw many dolphins in the rivers in his childhood, but now they are almost out of sight. "We can get back the dolphins if we can take some efforts to conserve them," he said.

According to a documentary film by Tanzilur Rahman, the number of dolphins decreased seriously in the last one and a half decades because of pollution in the rivers.

"Presence of the dolphins indicates the lives of the rivers," said Prof AKM Aminul Haque, former vice chancellor of Bangladesh Agriculture University, who first conducted researches on cetaceans in the country.

BCDP Programme Director Brian D Smith said, "Dolphins and whales are important for our existence. There will be both fish for human being and the mammals if the rivers are kept alive. So, we should take care of the dolphins and whales of Bangladesh."