

THE CONVENTION ON WETLANDS
64th meeting of the Standing Committee
Gland, Switzerland, 20-24 January 2025

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Proposed draft resolution on recognition of river dolphins as key species for the conservation and sustainable use of wetlands in South America and Asia

Submitted by Colombia

Action requested:

The Standing Committee is invited to review and approve the attached draft resolution for consideration by the 15th meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties.

Secretariat cover note

The draft resolution proposes to recognize river dolphins as key species for the conservation and sustainable use of wetlands in South America and Asia.

The text makes note of ongoing international efforts such as court decisions, United Nations Resolutions, the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework and other initiatives that provide a basis for the protection of rare, threatened and endangered species, and seeks to address the need for the conservation of aquatic biodiversity under the Convention and in particular of aquatic mammals given their high ecological value and representativeness in wetland ecosystems.

The draft resolution makes note of pillar iii) of the Fourth Strategic Plan of the Convention (2016-2024) which addresses international cooperation on transboundary wetlands and shared species. This reference could be updated at COP15 to reflect the final text of the fifth Strategic Plan which will guide the Convention from 2025.

The STRP has been invited to review the draft resolution.

Introduction

Background/contextual information for the Standing Committee

The Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development of Colombia has prepared this proposed resolution, taking into account the opportunity that exists to address the need for the conservation of aquatic biodiversity in the Convention and in particular aquatic mammals given their high ecological value and representativeness in wetland ecosystems. In this sense, between 23 and 24 October 2023, Colombia organized the meeting titled the Global Declaration for River Dolphins which was attended by 14 countries from South America and Asia with distribution of these species, and observers from the Secretariat of the Convention on Wetlands, the Convention on Migratory Species, the Embassy of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and the World Bank, which agreed on the Declaration and recommended preparing a draft resolution for COP15 of the Convention on Wetlands. This was also highlighted at the side event “River Dolphin Conservation: A Successful International Initiative” during COP16 of the Convention on Biological Diversity in Cali, Colombia.

Financial implications of implementation

No potential impact is foreseen on the workload of the Secretariat and on the core or supplementary budgets of the Convention in the implementation of the proposed Resolution.

Paragraph (number and key part of text)	Action	Core budget cost (CHF)	Non-core budget cost (CHF)

Draft resolution XV

Recognition of river dolphins as key species for the conservation and sustainable use of wetlands in South America and Asia

1. RECALLING that the 4th Strategic Plan of the Convention on Wetlands (2016-2024) highlights the three pillars of the Convention: i) the wise use of all wetlands through national plans, policies and legislation, management measures, and public education; ii) the designation and sustainable management of suitable wetlands for inclusion in the List of Wetlands of International Importance; and iii) international cooperation on transboundary wetlands and shared species;
2. RECOGNIZING that the network of Wetlands of International Importance (“Ramsar Sites”) and the effective management of these Sites and more broadly the wise use of the world’s other wetlands represent an essential contribution not only to the work of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), but also to that of other multilateral environmental agreements, such as the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS), the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), and the water-related Conventions; and the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) as well as implementing cooperation between regions;
3. RECALLING that the Ramsar Regional Initiative for the conservation and sustainable use of wetlands in the Amazon Basin, of which Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Suriname and Venezuela are members, includes 23 Ramsar Sites and promotes the establishment of corridors that support the ecological connectivity of wetlands in the Amazon Basin, as well as the protection, conservation and restoration of the habitat of species such as the river dolphin;
4. RECOGNIZING that coordinating or participating in cooperation platforms (at the site, city, watershed, lake and groundwater basin, country, regional and global scales), can promote the implementation of management actions for river dolphins living in rivers and wetlands in Asia and South America;
5. RECALLING that the Convention on Wetlands is the lead partner for cooperating in the implementation of wetland-related activities under the CBD and is responsible for providing policy, technical and scientific advice and guidance for that Convention and for enhancing cooperation between the two Conventions at all levels;
6. EMPHASIZING that the Fourth Strategic Plan of the Convention, under its four objectives and 19 specific targets, reflects that for the improvement of Ramsar Sites it is necessary to generate conservation and management measures, under integrated schemes involving the Parties;
7. AWARE that currently about 1.6 billion human beings inhabit the wetlands where six river dolphin species are found, which depend on wetlands to fulfill their life cycles, and that the impacts have caused their categorization by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) as endangered species: in South America, *Inia geoffrensis* and *Sotalia fluviatilis*, and in Asia, *Platanista gangetica*, *Platanista minor*, *Orcaella brevirostris* and the critically endangered *Neophocaena asiorientalis*;

8. RECOGNIZING that river dolphins have been used to assess the health of some wetlands in South America (Orinoco Basin in Colombia); and that the absence of these species in some stretches of rivers in Asia (Ganges and Jamuna Rivers) is indicative of low ecosystem function owing to the high levels of pollution, the reduction of river flows due to the development of infrastructure associated with the distribution of water resources and the energy matrix, as well as the use of these resources for agricultural activities;
9. NOTING that river dolphins are sentinel species for the conservation of large wetlands in South America and Asia, and FURTHER RECALLING that different governments such as those of Brazil, Ecuador and Peru have generated instruments such as the Conservation and Management Plan (CMP) for river dolphins in the Amazon, Orinoco and Tocantins-Araguaia river basins under the International Whaling Commission (IWC) as well as the Concerted Action on Gangetic River Dolphins under the CMS in which Bangladesh, India and Nepal cooperate;
10. RECALLING the non-binding Global Declaration for the Conservation of River Dolphins signed in Bogota, Colombia in October 2023 by Bangladesh, Bolivia, Brazil, Cambodia, Colombia, Ecuador, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Venezuela;
11. NOTING that river dolphins are currently found in at least 29 Ramsar Sites in South America and Asia covering a total of 27,497,064 hectares;
12. RECALLING that the criteria for the identification and designation of Wetlands Of International Importance reflect the inclusion of species that are threatened, that fulfil ecological roles that maintain biodiversity, and that take refuge in wetlands during extreme events and adverse conditions;
13. CONCERNED that climatic disturbances are demonstrably affecting the biological integrity of wetlands and the survival of their fish and river dolphins causing mass mortalities, such as those recorded in 2023 in the Amazon, and that unprecedented flooding has led to increased mortality and strandings of river dolphins in Asia, as well as increased vulnerability from illegal fishing activities;
14. EMPHASIZING that the implementation of conservation measures around river dolphins will benefit other aquatic vertebrate species including mammals (manatees, otters), reptiles (caimans, turtles) and fish such as the large migratory catfish of the Orinoco and Amazon basins;
15. RECOGNIZING that actions for sustainable use around river dolphins which benefit local communities have been promoted in Ramsar Sites such as, for example, responsible dolphin-watching tourism, the development of fishing agreements, the restoration of flooded forests, and the use of timber and non-timber products; and likewise, that those communities and Indigenous Peoples, including women and other vulnerable groups, have a fundamental role in the conservation of these species in wetlands;
16. FURTHER NOTING that CMS Resolution 12.23 on *Sustainable Tourism and Migratory Species* outlines general principles to ensure that tourism activities benefit and do not harm migratory species, including the involvement of, and benefits to, local communities; and

17. AWARE of the work of the Parties in developing tools aimed at the conservation and sustainable use of aquatic vertebrate species and especially river dolphins;

THE CONFERENCE OF THE CONTRACTING PARTIES

18. ENCOURAGES Contracting Parties to strengthen their management and conservation actions related to wetland habitats that are essential for river dolphins;
19. INVITES the Parties to consider river dolphins as keystone species for different levels of biodiversity, especially in the management of wetlands and the livelihoods of human communities associated with these ecosystems, and to implement the following actions:
 - Strive to halt and reverse the decline of all river dolphin populations in their range, and stabilize and increase the most threatened populations;
 - Implement measures to effectively manage, conserve, protect, sustainably use and restore river dolphin habitats, including the creation of a network of protected and connected riverine and lentic habitats, and increase the effectiveness of their management;
 - Promote the development of scientific and local and Indigenous communities' own research on river dolphins and their habitats, and monitoring of threats;
 - Generate actions in Ramsar Sites and other protected area complexes that benefit local communities through sustainable use such as responsible observation tourism, promotion of fishing agreements, restoration of flooded forests and use of timber and non-timber products among others;
 - Strengthen engagement with riparian communities, Indigenous Peoples, and other ethnic groups, taking into account the inclusive approach to conservation and sustainable use of natural resources;
 - Promote sustainable use, the application of good fishing practices, and other economic activities in wetlands;
 - Collaborate among Parties to improve the quality and quantity of water in these wetlands;
 - Collaborate with partners, financial institutions, civil society organizations and private sector actors to mobilize financial resources and strengthen technical capacities and technology transfer as mechanisms for the conservation and monitoring of river dolphins and their habitats;
20. REQUESTS the Parties to coordinate with expert groups, academics, local communities, and each other, to promote the development of activities for regional work and the conservation and sustainable use of river dolphins and other aquatic vertebrates in Ramsar Sites in Asia and South America; and
21. CALLS UPON the Contracting Parties to establish a mechanism for the exchange of information and experiences, in relation to the actions being taken under the various planning instruments such as the Global Declaration for River Dolphins (2023) and the Conservation and Management Plan (CMP) for river dolphins in the Amazon, Orinoco and Tocantins-Araguaia river basins, the Concerted Action on Gangetic River Dolphins under the Convention on Migratory Species, and the national management plans for these species and their habitats.