

DISAPPEARING DOLPHINS

Going on holiday could help save lives. Stuart Heaver reports that visitors to the remote town of Kratie, Cambodia are helping prevent the extinction of an endangered species

NORTH-EAST OF PHNOM PENH, UP THE mighty Mekong River in eastern Cambodia, is one of the last refuges of the critically endangered Irrawaddy dolphin. Threatened for years by pollution, urban development and climate change, the species has become so depleted that only three tiny freshwater populations remain worldwide. One of them can be found near Kratie, a sleepy town on the banks of the Mekong whose residents are determined to preserve the dolphins' existence here.

Supported by organisations like the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and the Cambodian Rural Development Team (CRDT), a conservation project has been set up to protect these marine mammals, but they need the support of visiting tourists to make it work.

Dolphin tourism provides local residents with an alternative source of income and, in turn, they work to further the conservation effort.

A dolphin-watching excursion here is an adventure. Tourists travel by bike or *tuk-tuk* to the village of Kampi, passing waving children, ox carts and monks on motorbikes along the way. The road north hugs the riverbank and during the dry season from December to April, the river is a splendid azure blue as it glides past on its 1,600km journey from the uplands of Tibet to its final destination – the South China Sea.

Our boat skipper, Pherom, hails from a family of fishermen. As a boy he helped his father catch fish but by the age of 15, he began escorting tourists on dolphin-watching trips instead. "In the old days there was fishing with electricity and explosives. The dolphins were also trapped in large fishing nets or hit by boats," he says. Thanks to the growth of dolphin-awareness programmes and the fact that fishing with large gillnets is forbidden near dolphin pools, these days the threat to dolphins is much reduced.

In fact, over the years many fishermen have been

re-trained as dolphin guides and local craftsmen spend their days carving dolphin souvenirs.

"There is strong evidence that the total population is now less than 100 dolphins and probably declining, but not as rapidly as we had feared," says Gordon Congdon, conservation manager for the WWF in Cambodia.

Shortly after setting off in Pherom's brightly painted boat, we hear the distinctive sound of dolphins clearing their blowholes. Soon, two small grey dorsal fins appear just off the



A couple of rare Irrawaddy dolphins

bow. It is a magical moment on the Mekong. The Irrawaddy dolphin is blue and grey, with a distinctive rounded head and a very small dorsal fin. Within a short time we catch fleeting glimpses of at least a dozen dolphins. Overwhelmed at this magnificent sight, our thoughts immediately turn to the question of how best to save these creatures from extinction.

"Ideally we would like to expand the project and stop gillnet fishing along this whole stretch," says Congdon. The conservation efforts are clearly having a positive impact. Still, there are probably three years left to ensure that the Mekong's dwindling Irrawaddy dolphin population isn't lost forever, which makes it crucial for those of us who want to make a difference to act now.

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