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Indus River Dolphin: India's Tiny and Endangered Population in the Beas

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CURATED & WRITTEN BY

**Bharat Choudhary**

UPSC Educator & Content Creator

[linkedin.com/in/epicbharat](https://www.linkedin.com/in/epicbharat)**ALSO FROM THE CREATOR****BharatNotes**Free UPSC notes, MCQs, PYQ analysis. **100% Free.**bharatnotes.com →**ADVERTISE****Advertise with Ujiyari**

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WHY IN NEWS

Conservation reserves and citizen science programmes in Punjab are working to protect the **Indus River dolphin's only Indian population** — a group of 18–35 individuals surviving in a stretch of the **Beas River** above the Harike Barrage. The species, listed as Endangered on the IUCN Red List, faces threats from habitat fragmentation, agricultural runoff, and declining river flow.

SPECIES PROFILE

FEATURE	DETAILS
Scientific name	<i>Platanista gangetica minor</i>
Common names	Indus River dolphin; Bhulan (in Pakistan)
Family	Platanistidae
IUCN Red List status	Endangered
India legal protection	Schedule I , Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 (highest protection)
India population	18–35 individuals in Beas River, Punjab
Location in India	Beas River, above Harike Barrage (Punjab)
Global population	~2,000 individuals (primarily Indus River, Pakistan)

TAXONOMY — A COMMON CONFUSION

The Indus River dolphin and the Gangetic river dolphin are closely related but distinct:

SPECIES	SCIENTIFIC NAME	DISTRIBUTION	IUCN STATUS
Gangetic river dolphin	<i>Platanista gangetica gangetica</i>	Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna basins	Endangered
Indus river dolphin	<i>Platanista gangetica minor</i>	Indus River (Pakistan) + Beas River (India)	Endangered

Both are **subspecies** of *Platanista gangetica*. The Gangetic river dolphin is India's **National Aquatic Animal** (declared 2009). The Indus river dolphin is a distinct subspecies — not the same as the National Aquatic Animal.

Questions often conflate the Gangetic dolphin (National Aquatic Animal, P. g. gangetica) with the Indus dolphin (P. g. minor). They are different subspecies. Both are Schedule I; only the Gangetic subspecies is the National Aquatic Animal.

UNIQUE BIOLOGICAL FEATURES

The Indus River dolphin has remarkable adaptations to turbid (murky) river environments:

Functional Blindness

- The Indus dolphin is **functionally blind** — it has vestigial eyes with **no crystalline lens**
- It can detect light and darkness but cannot form images
- This is an evolutionary adaptation to the turbid, silt-laden waters of the Indus system where vision provides no survival advantage

Echolocation Navigation

- The dolphin navigates entirely by **echolocation (biosonar)** — emitting high-frequency clicks that bounce off objects
- The melon (fatty tissue in the forehead) focuses outgoing clicks; the lower jaw conducts returning echoes
- Resolution is sufficient to detect fish and avoid obstacles in complete darkness

Side-Swimming Behaviour

- The Indus dolphin **swims on its side** — a unique behaviour among cetaceans
- This allows it to navigate very shallow water (as shallow as 30 cm in some reports) without stranding
- The side-swimming posture may also help it locate prey by scanning the river bottom

INDIA'S POPULATION — THE BEAS RIVER

Why Only the Beas?

The Indus River dolphin's historical range in India included the **Ravi, Beas, Sutlej, and Chenab** rivers in pre-partition Punjab. After:

- The **1947 Partition** — the Indus mainstream and most tributaries fell in Pakistan
- **Irrigation barrages** (especially Harike, Ferozepur) — created physical barriers for dolphin movement
- **Water diversion** — canal systems drastically reduced flows in Indian tributaries

Today, the **only Indian population** exists in a ~185 km stretch of the Beas River **above the Harike Barrage** in Punjab.

Harike Barrage — Why It's Critical

- Harike Barrage (at Ferozepur) creates the **Harike Wetland** (Hari-ke-Pattan) — a Ramsar Site (designated 1990)
- The barrage **blocked dolphin movement** between the Beas and the Sutlej (and Harike Lake)
- Dolphins trapped above the barrage form the isolated Indian population

Conservation in the Beas

INITIATIVE	DETAILS
Beas Conservation Reserve	Notified 2017; key protected stretch for dolphins
WWF-India	Population surveys; fishermen engagement
Punjab Government	Patrolling; fishing regulation in dolphin habitat
Citizen science	Volunteer boat surveys to count and track dolphins

THREATS TO THE INDIAN POPULATION

The tiny Indian population (18–35 individuals) faces existential threats:

- ❶ **Population size** — At 18–35 individuals, the population is critically small; any catastrophic event (disease, flood, drought) could eliminate it
- ❷ **Inbreeding risk** — Small isolated populations have limited genetic diversity
- ❸ **Habitat fragmentation** — The Harike Barrage prevents reconnection with the Pakistani population

- ④ **Agricultural runoff** — Pesticides and fertilizers from Punjab’s intensive agriculture contaminate the river
- ⑤ **Fishing nets** — Accidental entanglement (bycatch) in gill nets and fishing traps
- ⑥ **Sand mining** — Disrupts river morphology and reduces suitable shallow-water habitat
- ⑦ **Reduced river flow** — Canal irrigation drastically reduces Beas River discharge, shrinking dolphin habitat

GLOBAL CONTEXT — PAKISTAN’S INDUS DOLPHIN POPULATION

Pakistan holds ~95% of the world’s Indus river dolphins (~2,000 individuals):

- **Main range:** Guddu Barrage to Sukkur Barrage (Sindh Province)
- Protected areas: **Indus Dolphin Reserve** (1974) between Sukkur and Guddu barrages
- Key threats: Same as India — barrages, irrigation, pollution; additionally, accidental killing

WWF Pakistan conducts annual population surveys; the ~2,000 figure comes from their surveys (significant recovery from ~1,000 in the 1970s).

INDIA’S RIVER DOLPHIN CONSERVATION — BROADER CONTEXT

Project Dolphin (2020)

India launched **Project Dolphin** in 2020 — modelled on Project Tiger — to conserve both river (Gangetic dolphin) and marine (Irrawaddy dolphin, humpback dolphin) cetaceans.

National Aquatic Animal (Gangetic Dolphin)

The **Gangetic river dolphin** (*Platanista gangetica gangetica*) was declared India’s **National Aquatic Animal** in **2009** (Wildlife Week declaration, October 5, 2009).

PROTECTED STATUS	DETAIL
Schedule I, WPA 1972	Highest domestic protection — hunting/trade prohibited
CITES Appendix I	International trade prohibited
IUCN Endangered	Global conservation priority

UPSC RELEVANCE

PAPER	ANGLE
GS3 — Environment	Endangered species; river ecology; conservation reserves
GS3 — Environment	Ramsar sites; WPA Schedule I; Project Dolphin
GS1 — Geography	Beas River; Harike Barrage; Punjab river systems
Prelims	Scientific name; IUCN status; WPA Schedule; Harike Barrage; National Aquatic Animal distinction
Mains	Threat analysis; conservation interventions; river dolphin vs tiger conservation model

*Scientific name: **Platanista gangetica minor** | Common name: Bhulan (Pakistan) | IUCN: **Endangered** | India WPA: **Schedule I** | India population: **18–35** individuals, **Beas River, Punjab** (above Harike Barrage) | Global: **~2,000** (primarily Indus River, Pakistan) | Features: **Functionally blind** (no eye lens); **echolocation; swims on its side** | India's National Aquatic Animal: **P. g. gangetica** (Gangetic dolphin) — NOT the same subspecies | Beas Conservation Reserve: notified 2017 | Project Dolphin: launched 2020 | Harike Barrage: isolates Indian population; Harike Wetland = Ramsar Site (1990) | GS3: Environment & Ecology*

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