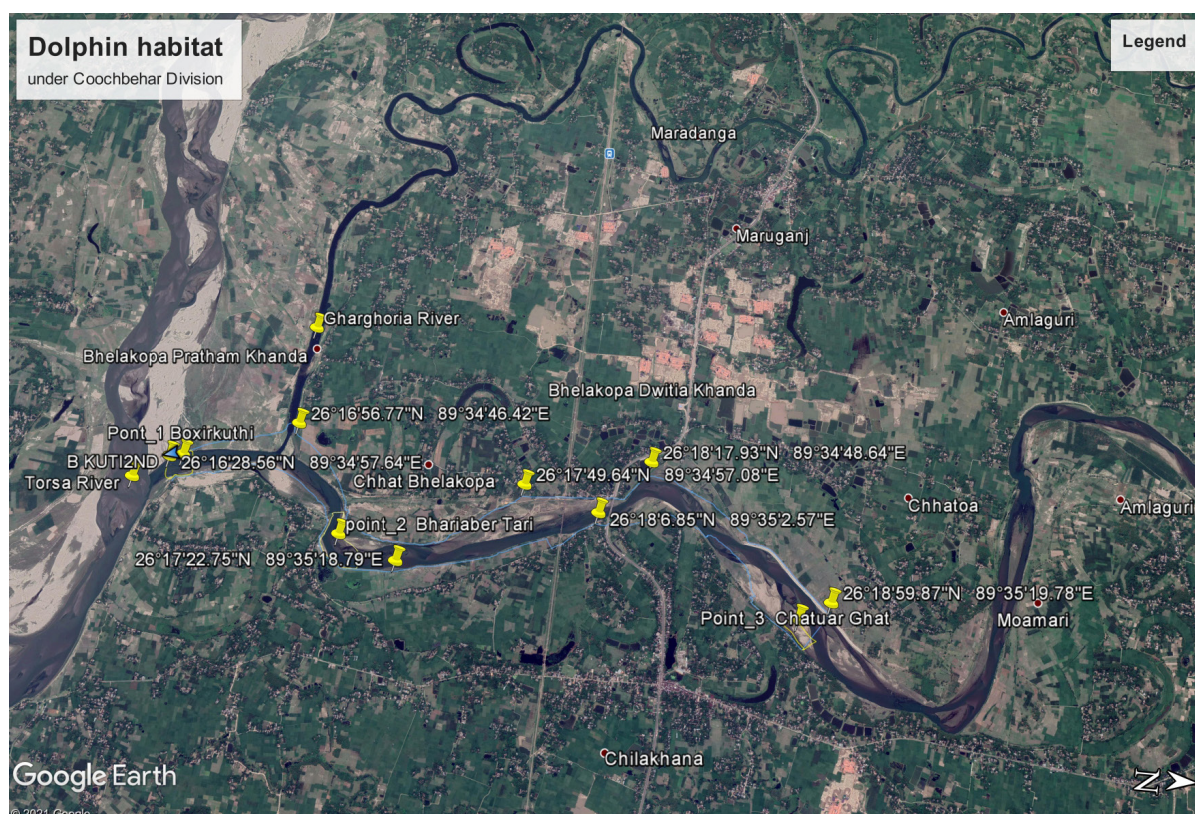


## Transformation of poachers to protectors through Science Education- a real life story

It was 3rd July, 2021. Like every day I came back to my Division Office Bungalow Cooch Behar at 06:30 pm, and was about to take a sip of tea when my phone rang. My Range Officer, Sri Suranjan Sarkar, was on the phone. He called to report an incidence of poaching of a Ganges River Dolphin- an endangered Indian mammal in the village Bhairab-er-tari of Cooch Behar and wanted to know the official way to address the issue.



Dolphin of Balabhut, Cooch Behar district.



Dolphin habitat.





Awareness creation among the local fishermen through River patrolling.

Within minutes I constituted a team of good forest personnel under the leadership of Shri Bijan Kumar Nath, Assistant Divisional Forest Officer of Cooch Behar Division and sent the team to the village. Upon visiting the site, my team came to know that a fisherman named Akkas Ali Sekh, killed, and transported the carcass of

the Ganges River Dolphin to his house. Killing of any Schedule I animal, like Ganges River Dolphin is treated as hunting as per Sec. 9 of the Wild Life Protection Act, 1972. So Akkas Ali Sekh was arrested by the Range Officer. We produced him in the court and got seven days police custody. During this period he was interrogated

by me and some other officials. He told me that for him the dolphin was just like any other fish for him and would fetch him good amount of money. He sold the dolphin to his neighbour fisherman, Samir Sekh for Rs. 6500. We are yet to find Samir Sekh.

After a week I visited the village Bhairab-er-tari, identified the spot where the dolphin was killed and interacted with the local people of that village. I found that most people thought dolphin was a fish. Though they don't eat the Dolphin meat, but extract oil from the thick layer of body fat (blubber) under the skin of Dolphin and sell it to others to



Story of Dolphin along with penal provision narrated in local Vernacular through display board.

catch fish. But actually this blubber keeps warm and also improves the buoyancy of Dolphins (Pennisi 2000). Now, studies of trained dolphins suggest an additional function: Blubber turns the dolphin's tail into one long spring that helps it swim efficiently (Pennisi 2000).

After analysing the preliminary field data and I have found that only science education and communication can transform poachers to protectors. With that objective we have started education and awareness campaign among the masses of that area. For science education regarding dolphin conservation I have conducted several field visits for protection, monitoring, and patrolling using country boat at the river confluence of Torsa-Kaljani-Ghargharia.

To communicate the concept of conservation I have created the following story.

One day few fishermen were congregated in the Balabhut area of Cooch Behar district to get lease of the river area for fishing from the district administration. To their utter astonishment a dolphin, locally known as "Sishu/Shusuk" came to the surface of the river water and addressed them "Friends, both humans and the Ganges River Dolphin are closely related.

The dolphins are not responsible for the reduction of fish population in the rivers, but their presence assures steady increase of fishes in rivers. Dolphins are regulating the fish production by targeting and eating the small fishes and in this way allowing and

assuring healthy stock of good quality higher yield of fishes in rivers. Hunting of dolphins with fishing nets will not be beneficial to you. As per the Sec. 51 of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 hunting of dolphin by any person is treated as offence and shall be punishable with imprisonment for a term which may extend to 7 years or with fine which may extend to twenty five thousand rupees or with both."

Before the Ganges River Dolphin dived in he said "It is better to build a mutual relationship of cooperation, co-existence and permanent friendship along with dolphins".

To inculcate compassion among the masses I have narrated the same story of dolphin conservation in local vernacular languages by installing different display board in the fishermen villages of Bhairab-er-tari, Baxirkuthi and Balabhut area of the river confluence of Torsha-Kaljani-Ghargharia of Cooch Behar.

Visualization of a story is better to create an impact on people. After one month of installation of this awareness board I again conducted field visit in dolphin habitats of those areas. At the time of protection patrolling with country boat I have interacted with a 11 year old son of a fisherman and asked him if has he seen any display board in his village. He told yes. Then I asked him what was written on it. He answered that "Dolphin is a mammal like us and hunting of Ganges River Dolphin shall be punishable with imprisonment for a term of 7 years, with fine of Rs.25,000."

Here is the importance of imparting scientific knowledge through stories and real-life situations.

Stories are not only imparting scientific knowledge to the masses, but also increases the knowledge base of scientists. Shri Ravindra Kumar Sinha, the Dolphin Man of India gathered lots of knowledge regarding the behaviour of dolphins from the real-life stories narrated by the fishermen of Bihar to him at the time of dolphin population estimation in the River Ganges through country boat. I came to know this information from a lecture of Shri Ravindra Kumar Sinha Sir available on YouTube.

One fisherman narrated that “one day he observed that after giving birth of live young, Dolphin aunties are lifting the baby to fill air in the lungs of the baby dolphin to start respiration like humans. It imparted scientific knowledge that they are not having gills like fish. The same fisherman also narrated that one day he had seen that one mother dolphin gave birth to a dead baby and tried for the whole day to make it swim. Dolphin mother was not ready to believe that her baby was dead. This real-life story established the fact that dolphins are not only warm-blooded mammals like us but have compassion for their children like human mothers. I have narrated the same story to the fishermen of my area and created compassion to transform them from poachers to protectors of dolphin like a “Dolphin Mitra” (Friend of dolphin).

#### Reference

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