

FINAL REPORT- DOLPHINS OF KAKADU

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PROJECT SUMMARY

Since 2007, a project surveying for coastal dolphins in the Alligator Rivers of Kakadu National Park and surrounding waters has been undertaken. The collaborative project between scientists from Biodiversity Conservation (Dept. of Natural Resources, Environment, the Arts and Sport) and Kakadu National Park was the first coastal dolphin project in the Northern Territory. Project aims included record distribution, habitat use and if possible develop abundance estimates.

Kakadu is home to two types of dolphins: the Australian snubfin and the Indo-Pacific humpback.



Kakadu is an important area for coastal dolphins

Coastal dolphins are one of the most threatened mammal groups in the world. Coastal dolphins live close to the coast (< 20 km), in harbours, bays and in estuaries and they can be impacted by human activities in and around those areas.

In Kakadu (as we discovered), the Australian snubfin (snubby) was recorded 50 km upstream in the South Alligator River and the Indo-Pacific humpback (humpback) was recorded 30 km upstream in the East Alligator River. Coastal dolphins had not been recorded this far upstream before in Australia.

In Kakadu, the snubby and the humpback have been recorded with newborn calves and juveniles, highlighting that the Alligator Rivers region is an



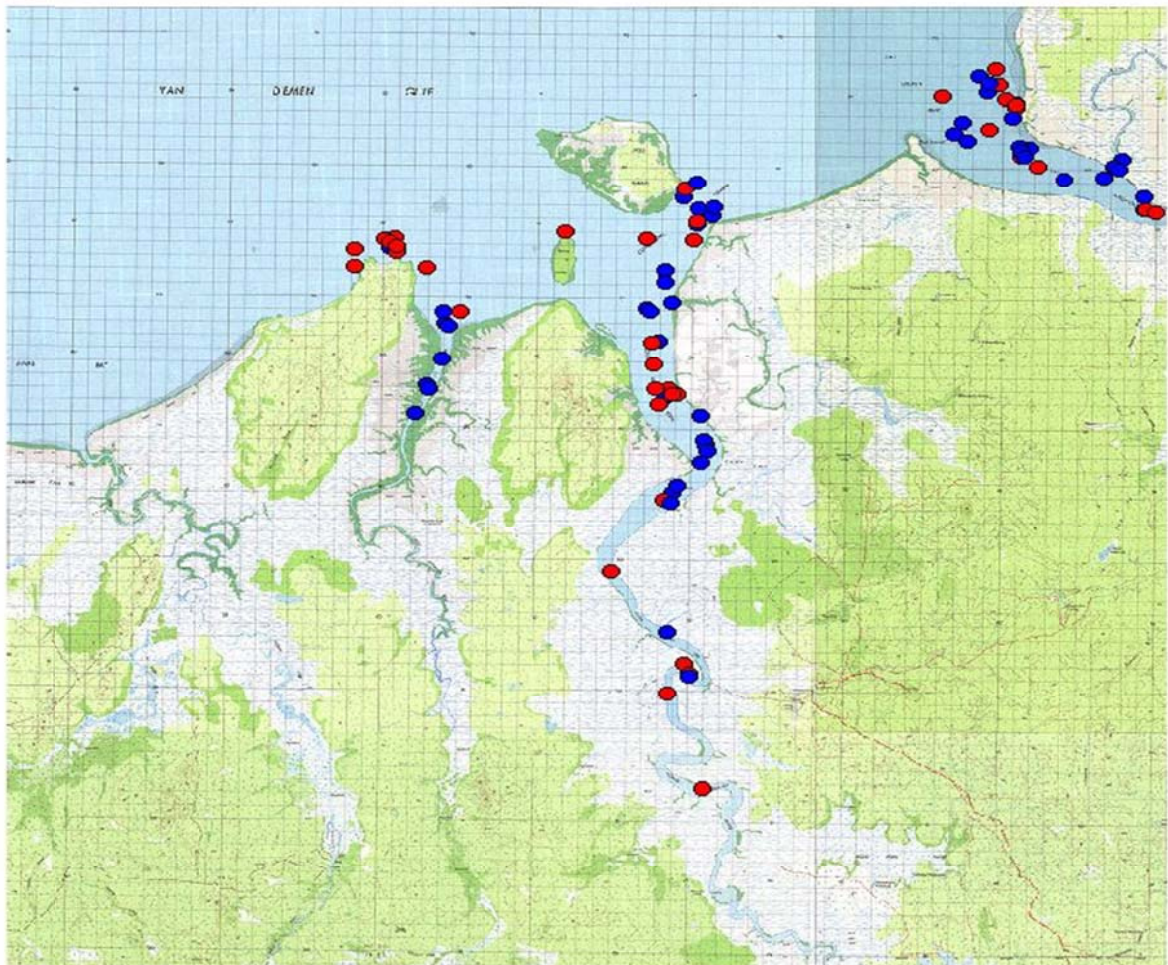
2008)

important area for coastal dolphin populations and the area supports family groups. The relatively pristine and undeveloped Alligators Rivers region holds secure populations and is critically important for the longterm conservation of both dolphin species.



Where we found costal dolphins in Kakadu

Coastal dolphin sightings from March 2007 until August 2011



- Australian snubfin
- Indo-Pacific humpback

Sighting summary

The coastal dolphin project in Kakadu has added really good information on coastal dolphins generally, and without this project, there would be a significant lack of distribution records and the range of habitats that coastal dolphins use. Overall, the sighting records emphasise that coastal dolphins are a significant mammal fauna of Kakadu National Park and the coastal-estuarine ecological communities where they live, which in many other parts of Australia are threatened. Despite their wide distribution, populations of the snubby and humpback dolphins are small and are thought to be localised.



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River,

Threats

Dolphins are generally long lived (30 to 60 years) and slow breeding (one calf every four to six years) so they can suffer potentially rapid population declines when the areas that they live in are impacted by human activities like gill-net fishing, port developments, increasing boat and shipping traffic and pollution.



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Working with Rangers

The surveys have been pretty tough because during the dry season staff usually overnight on the boat and in the wet season a lot of time is spent travelling to the survey areas from the South Alligator boat ramp and back each day (because we didn't want to get caught in the big wet season storms).

Since 2007, thirty five Kakadu staff have been part of the dolphin surveys over 50 days.



Working with Rangers



to: Carol

Working on the water

The coastal dolphin project has helped support a regular KNP presence at the mouths of the Alligator and Wildman Rivers helped maintain and increase boat handling skills of Rangers and has trained Kakadu staff in marine mammal survey techniques.



Matt Dunn checking a commercial fishing boat anchored in the mouth of the Wildman River

Working on the water



Storm approaching South Alligator River November 2008 (Photo: Trish Flores)

RECOMMENDATIONS

Not many people realise that dolphins call Kakadu home!! Kakadu National Park is a really important area for the two species of coastal dolphins. The dolphins move inside and outside of the Park and between all the Alligator Rivers of Kakadu. There are only a few marine areas in the Northern Territory that offer protection to coastal dolphins and the Alligator Rivers of Kakadu National Park is one of those areas. To keep looking after the dolphins of Kakadu, it will be important to raise awareness, record traditional ecological information and strengthen on-ground monitoring and reporting.

Raise awareness

- Interpretive displays - At both the South and East Alligator River boat ramps interpretative information should be developed and incorporated onto large signs that show what the dolphins look like and general information on these unusual dolphins that live in the muddy waters of the Alligator Rivers.
- Slow down signs – When dolphins are spotted - boats need to slow down and a keen watch maintained on where the dolphins are swimming too. Boats go so fast now that it could be difficult for dolphins (and other large marine megafauna) to get out of the way in time - boat strikes are a real possibility and people driving boats need to be aware that they share the waters of Kakadu with large marine megafauna - dolphins, dugongs, crocodiles, turtles and stingrays and they need to take care.

Traditional ecological knowledge

- Record traditional information - Actively seek out Tradition Owners who have language names and other information for these two dolphins and incorporate into interpretive signs and develop an information package for the local school and the Bowali Visitor Centre.

Monitor dolphin populations

- Maintain a sightings database – Park staff should be encouraged to record sightings and submit formally to the Kakadu database manager.
 - Strandings – should be reported to **MARINE WILDWATCH HOTLINE 1800 453 941** and location recorded, photos and a tissue sample taken and submit to the Marine Wildwatch staff.
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WHO WAS INVOLVED IN THE DOLPHIN SURVEYS - MARCH 2007 to AUGUST 2011

Date	Boat	Crew
Mar-07	Parks 1/Quintrix	CP, Andrew Wellings, Fred Baird, Lucas Patterson
Apr-07	River boat	CP, Mick Gorst, Anna Pickworth
May-07	River boat	CP, Mick Gorst, Kym Brennan
Jun-07	River boat / Kullari	CP, Craig Ward, Fred Baird, Lucas Patterson, ABC Catalyst film crew
Jul-07	Swamp Dog	CP, Craig Ward, Gary Lindner, Sean Nadji
Aug-07	Swamp Dog	CP, Steve Winderlich, Gary Lindner, Jonathon Nadji, Craig Ward
Sep-07	Swamp Dog	CP, Mick Gorst, Brett Manders
Oct-07	Swamp dog / Kullari	CP, Calvin Murakami, David Brown, Fred Baird, Terry Mahney + Catalyst crew
Nov-07	River boat	CP, Kathy Wilson, Mick Gorst
Dec-07	River Boat	CP, Paddy Cahill, Paul Van Nimwegen
Feb-08	River Boat	CP, Mick Gorst, Patrick O'Shaughnessy
Mar-08	Quintrix	CP, Fred Baird, Sean Nadji
Apr-08	River Boat	CP, Mick Gorst, Terry Mahney
Nov-08	Betty Boo	CP, Terry Mahney, Trish Flores
Dec-08	Swamp Dog	CP, Fred Baird, Steve Johns
Feb-09	River Boat	CP, Sean Nadji, Joe Nagawalli, Trish Flores, Josh Taylor
Mar-09	River Boat	CP, Matt Rawlinson, Richard Cooper, Joline Patterson, Trish Flores
Sep-10	Parks 1	CP, Paddy Cahill, Robbie Markham
Oct-10	Swamp Dog	CP, Ollie Scheibe, Joe Nagawalli
Nov-10	Swamp Dog	CP, Josh Taylor, Sean Nadji, Kym Brennan
Mar-11	Swamp Dog	CP, Jason Koh, Jessie Alderson
Apr-11	Parks 1	CP, Matt Rawlinson, Dwain Wauchope
Jun-11	Swamp Dog	CP, Matt Dunn, Mick Gorst, Stuart Young
Jul-11	Parks 1	Stuart Young, Mick Gorst, Anne Taylor
Aug-11	Parks 1	CP, Billy Fordham, Billy Markham, Josh Taylor

(CP = Carol Palmer)