

An illustration of a river dolphin, possibly a Ganges Dolphin, caught in a green fishing net. The dolphin is shown from the side, with its head tilted upwards and its mouth open, revealing small teeth. Bubbles are rising from its blowhole. The background is a dark, murky green, suggesting a river environment. The text 'Together for River Dolphins' is written in a large, white, sans-serif font across the upper right portion of the image. Below it, the subtitle 'Rescue Guide for River Dolphins.' is written in a smaller, white, sans-serif font.

Together for River Dolphins

Rescue Guide for River Dolphins.

An illustration of a river dolphin, possibly a Ganges Dolphin, entangled in a green fishing net. The dolphin is shown from the side, with its head and front flippers visible. It has a dark grey body with a lighter, pinkish-grey patch on its side. Its mouth is open, showing small teeth and a pink tongue. Bubbles are rising from its blowhole. The background is a dark, murky green, suggesting a river environment. The text "Together for River Dolphins" is written in large, white, bold letters across the upper right portion of the image. Below it, the text "Rescue Guide for River Dolphins." is written in a smaller, white, sans-serif font.

Together for River Dolphins

Rescue Guide for River Dolphins.



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Introduction

River dolphins are among the most threatened cetacean species in the world. They face numerous dangers in the rivers they inhabit: deforestation, loss of river connectivity due to dams, water pollution from heavy metals such as mercury, oil spills, agrochemicals, reduced food availability due to overfishing, climate-related disruptions including extreme droughts, and accidental capture in fishing nets (bycatch). In particular, the last two threats deserve special attention, as the number of dolphins trapped in water bodies across various countries has increased in recent years. In some cases, they were able to be rescued—while in others, unfortunately, they were not.

In 2023, more than 300 dolphins died during an unprecedented drought in the central Amazon region of Brazil, likely due to thermal shock—water temperatures reached 41°C. Researchers, fishers, and local authorities were largely unable to assist these animals. Additionally, the widespread use of monofilament fishing nets has become the leading cause of direct mortality for river dolphins, especially calves and juveniles.

These animals often suffer in the nets due to lack of monitoring, and in many cases, fishers are unsure how to safely release them.

This is why we decided to publish a practical guide detailing the correct procedures for rescuing a dolphin, transporting it when necessary, and releasing it from a net without causing harm. It is important to emphasize that rescue efforts should always involve the appropriate authorities, trained professionals, and qualified personnel.

Fernando Trujillo
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River Dolphins Around the World:

Endangered Species

Freshwater dolphins inhabit several rivers across the globe, particularly in Asia and South America. Many of these species are endangered—or in some cases, already extinct.

Extreme droughts, driven by climate change, are causing significant dolphin mortality, especially in the Amazon region.

In China's Yangtze River, the Baiji dolphin was declared extinct in 2006.

The Yangtze River is still home to the finless porpoise, which remains highly threatened.

The Susu dolphin (*Platanista gangetica*) inhabits the Ganges, Brahmaputra, and Meghna rivers (India, Nepal, Bangladesh), as well as the Indus River in Pakistan.

- 1 *Inia geoffrensis* EN
- 2 *Inia g. humboldtiana**
- 3 *Inia araguaiaensis**
- 4 *Inia boliviensis**
- 5 *Sotalia fluviatilis* EN
- 6 *Sotalia sp.***
- 7 *Platanista minor* EN
- 8 *Platanista gangetica* EN
- 9 *Neophocena asiaorientalis* EN
- 10 *Lipotes vexillifer* EX
- 11 *Orcaella brevirostris* EN

*Currently, these populations have not yet been recognized as distinct species/subspecies by the IUCN, and therefore do not have an official conservation status.

**Unidentified Species.

Threats That May Require the Rescue of a River Dolphin

1 Entanglement in Fishing Nets

When a dolphin becomes trapped in a fishing net (such as gillnets or trammel nets) and cannot escape, it may be unable to reach the surface to breathe. This can lead to drowning, severe weakness, or injury.

If detected in time, an entangled dolphin can be rescued and survive.

2 Climate Disruptions: Climate Change and Extreme Droughts

Climate change is one of the major global concerns, as it causes drastic variations in temperature and river water levels.

These changes intensify phenomena such as droughts and floods, which not only impact aquatic ecosystems and biodiversity but also affect thousands of people living along riverbanks. During droughts, water levels drop so low that isolated channels dry up, leaving dolphins stranded in shallow pools.

3 River Channel Modification

When water is diverted for agricultural or industrial use, the amount of water available in the main river channel decreases. Combined with droughts caused by climate change, this increases the likelihood of dolphins becoming trapped in shallow pools.



During the dry season, some water bodies may drop by as much as 15 meters.

Getting to Know the Dolphin

Anatomy

Dolphins are aquatic mammals highly sensitive to droughts and extreme water temperatures. Unfortunately, during these periods, many nets are placed in small rivers and channels, blocking dolphin movement and causing accidental mortality.

Long, slender **snout** with teeth in both jaws.

Blowhole or nasal opening.

Low and fibrous **dorsal fin** shaped like a keel.

Fibrous **tail fluke**, without bones and positioned horizontally

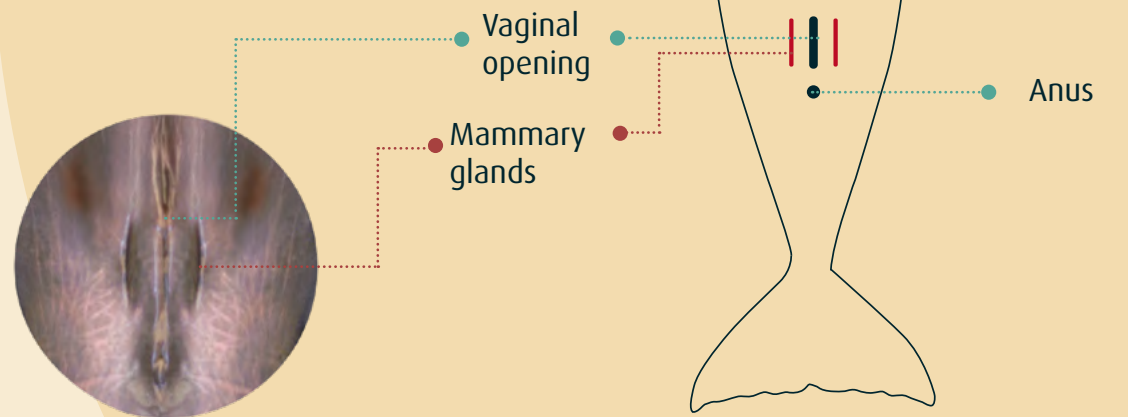
Bulging **melon**.

Broad and large **pectoral fins** with skeletal support and mobility

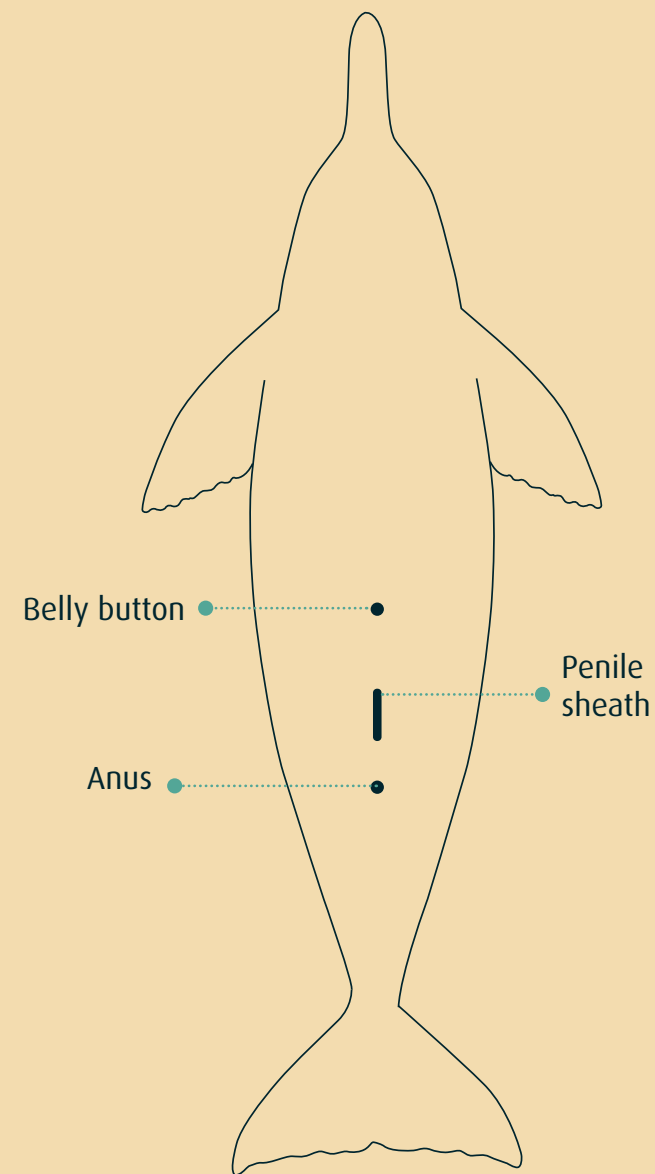
How to Differentiate Females from Males

(*Inia geoffrensis*)

Females have mammary glands located on either side of the genital opening. Males are generally larger than females and do not have mammary glands.



Female



Male



They can reach up to 2.80 meters in length



They can weigh up to 220 kilograms



Exposed dolphin penis

Ways to Untangle a Dolphin from a Net



If you observe wounds, redness, or difficulty moving or breathing, the dolphin may require veterinary attention.

1



Stay calm.

2



Alert nearby people to assist. Try to soothe the animal and carefully remove it from the net, starting with the snout and pectoral fins. During this process, hold the dolphin firmly to prevent it from thrashing and injuring itself.

3



Whenever possible, **contact an environmental authority, veterinarian, or specialized organization.**

4



Ensure the dolphin can regularly reach the surface to breathe.

5



If the dolphin is heavily entangled in a deep area, you may approach using a canoe. Position the canoe parallel to the animal—this will facilitate the untangling process.

6



Try to untangle the net. If that's not possible, cut it to prevent the dolphin from getting injured. **Act quickly, but with care.**

Pay attention to the animal's snout; this may be one of the most affected body parts.

Generally, the snout and pectoral fins are the areas most likely to become entangled in the net.



Cut the net with a blunt-tipped knife or scissors.

Avoid making cuts near the eyes, the blowhole (respiratory opening), and the genitals.



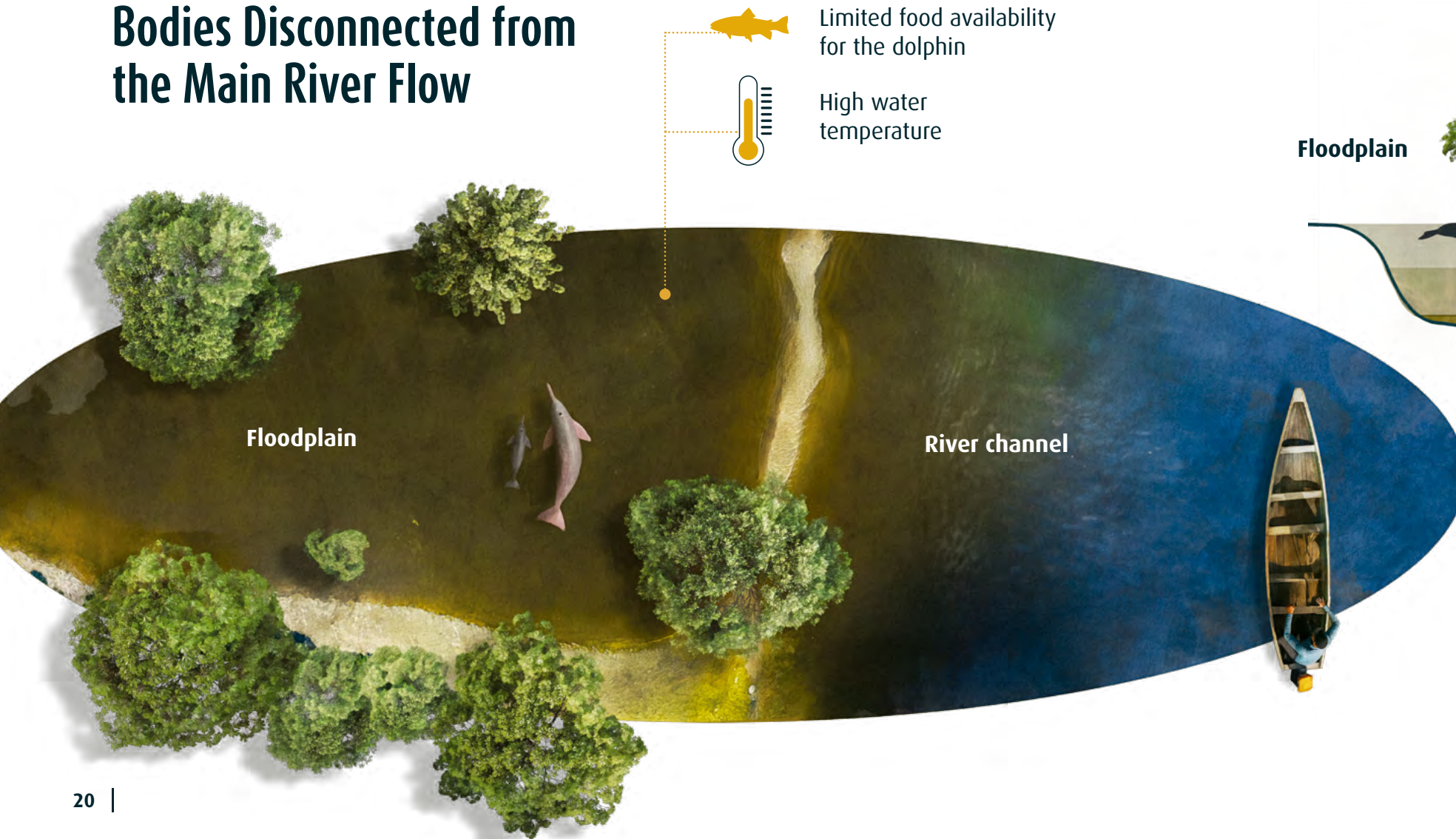
Usually, the dolphin will not try to bite, but the snout must be held carefully and opened slightly to release the net.



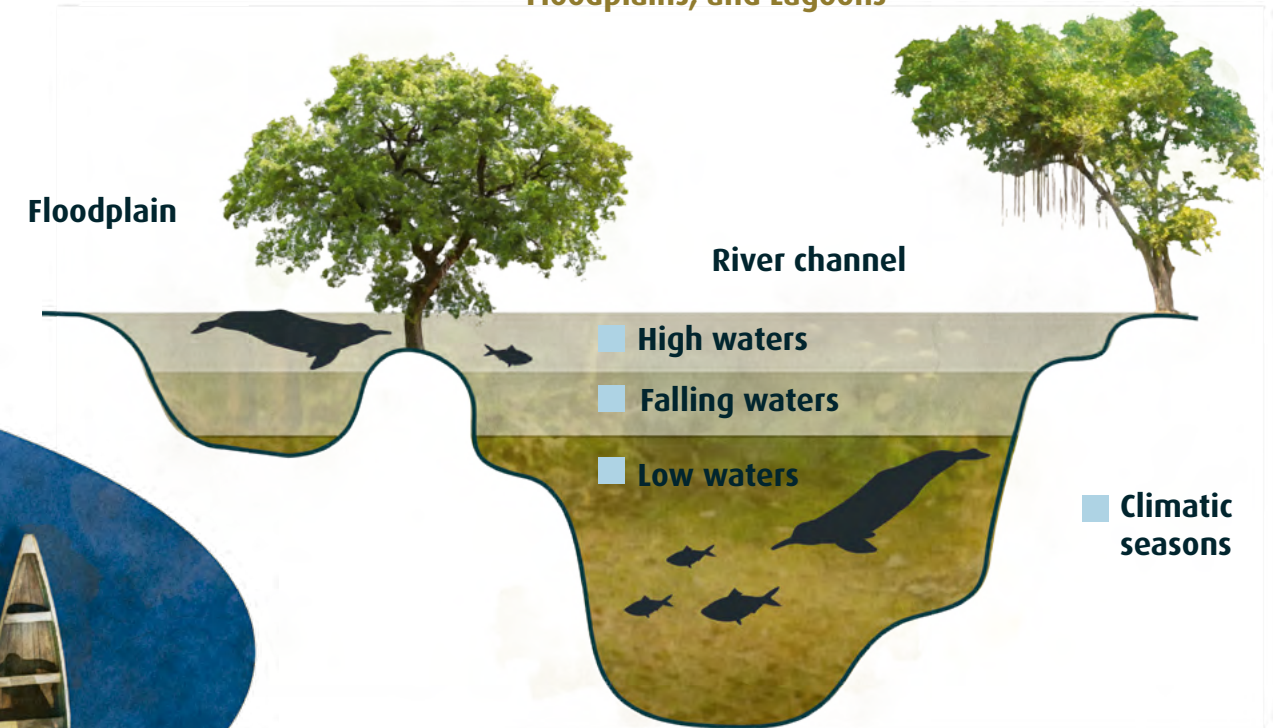
Hold the dolphin firmly, but without applying pressure to its torso. Never hold it by the fin or the tail. Avoid positioning yourself behind the tail to prevent being struck.

One person can hold it in the water, with the blowhole facing upward or sideways, while another person works to remove the net.

Dolphins Trapped in Water Bodies Disconnected from the Main River Flow



Connections Between Rivers, Floodplains, and Lagoons



A flood pulse is a natural process in which rivers increase their flow and temporarily and cyclically overflow, covering low-lying plains (high waters). This phenomenon is common in lowland rivers, such as those in the Amazon, and is part of their natural dynamics—not a natural disaster.

However, during drier seasons, water levels are dropping to increasingly lower and concerning values.

How to Help a Dolphin in This Situation

Before taking action, **assess the situation:**

- ☐ Number of dolphins and whether they are adults or calves
- ☐ **What species is it?** (Amazon river dolphin or tucuxi)
- ☐ Depth and size of the water body
- ☐ **Site access** (Can it be reached on foot, by boat, or is a 4x4 vehicle needed?)
- ☐ Weather conditions and ambient temperature
- ☐ Notify the environmental authorities

Recommended Actions:

-  **Single healthy dolphin with good access**
Small net + basic equipment + immediate release
-  **Multiple dolphins with very shallow water**
Coordination with environmental authorities, NGOs, and local communities + large net + logistical support
-  **Injured or weak dolphin**
Veterinary assessment + transfer to rehabilitation
-  **Sin acceso por tierra o lancha**
Institutional support (Civil Defense, Air Force, Environmental Police, local communities, helicopter, etc.)

What Is Needed?

Basic materials required for rescue, restraint, and transport:

- 1 Gloves
- 2 Face masks
- 3 Towels
- 4 Wet tarps or mats
- 5 Rubber boots
- 6 Life jacket
- 7 Transport stretcher (If unavailable, a hammock or blanket can be used for this purpose)
- 8 Buckets or watering cans to keep the animal moist
- 9 Safety tape

Additional materials for measuring and weighing:

- 10 Flexible measuring tape
- 11 Crane scale



When near a dolphin, avoid wearing or carrying accessories such as rings, metallic objects and sharp items that could injure the animal.



Available Net Types and Which Are Best



Soft trammel-type net or large cotton monofilament: Ideal for enclosing without causing harm.

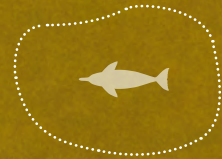


Encircling net with floats and sinkers: Useful when there is more than one dolphin.



Fine nylon nets or common fishing nets: avoid them—they can cause injuries.

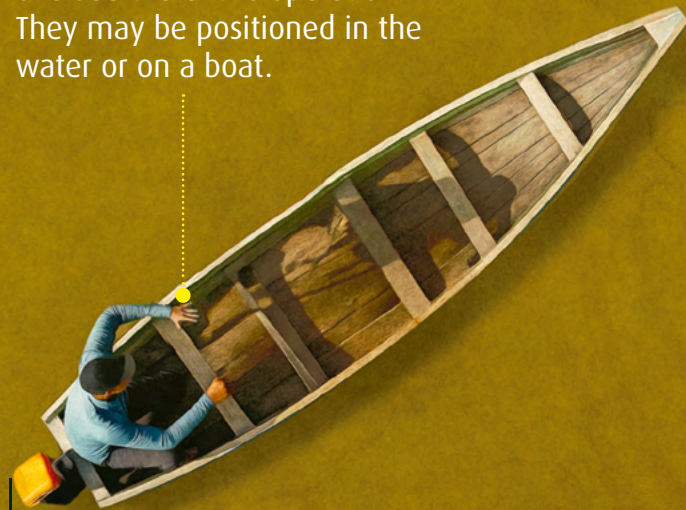
How to Set the Net and Organize the Capture



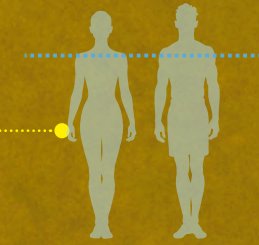
Place the net in a semicircle around the dolphin.

While enclosing the area, people should remain outside the net. Then, for handling, decide how many will enter.

Assign one person to guide and oversee the entire operation. They may be positioned in the water or on a boat.



Avoid making noise or sudden movements.



Once the net has been reduced and the water depth is less than 1.2 meters, four to five people should carefully enter the inner area of the net.



If it's a mother with her calf, it is recommended to restrain both and keep them close together to prevent either from stressing.

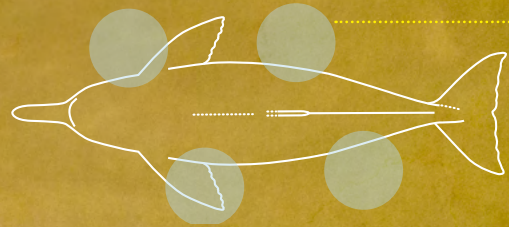
When the dolphin propels itself into the net and becomes trapped, a coordinated action should be taken to hold and restrain it simultaneously with several people.

What to Do If There Is More Than One Dolphin in the Net

Restrain one at a time and avoid letting them collide with each other or with the net.

To do this, it is important that, while one dolphin is being removed from the water, other team members stay inside the net with the remaining dolphins. If any become entangled in the net, apply physical restraint and stay with them in the water.

Physical Restraint of the Dolphin



Hold the dolphin with both hands around its torso. This must be a team effort, with at least four people restraining the dolphin—two on each side.

Children and pregnant women should not participate in this action.



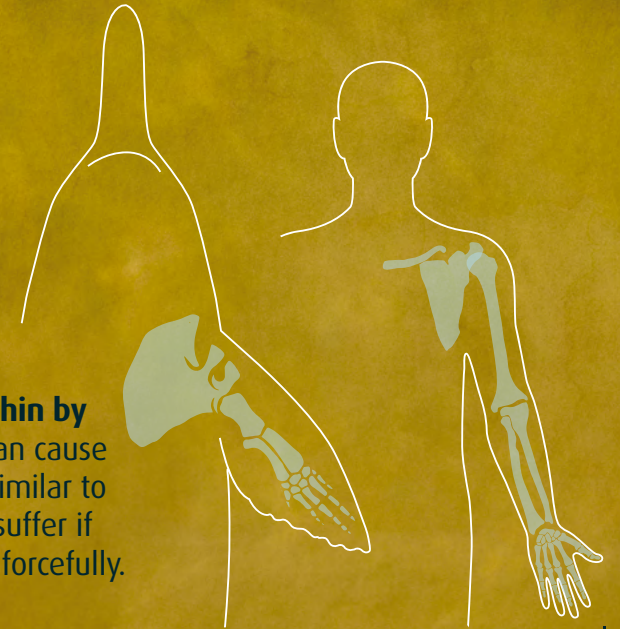
Special care must be taken with the head and fins, as the dolphin will be frightened and may make sudden, strong movements that could injure someone.



Do not place your hands on the dolphin's skin if they are very warm, as this could cause burns. **Keep hands moist at all times or use gloves if possible.**

Avoid placing hands on wounds or injuries, because this may worsen them and they represent sources of infection.

Never restrain a dolphin by the tail or fins. This can cause serious joint injuries, similar to what a person would suffer if their arm were pulled forcefully.



Hold the dolphin's snout firmly and try to keep its head as straight as possible.



Use damp towels to cover its eyes in order to reduce stress.



Keep in mind that it is advisable to **cordon off the area** to prevent crowds that could further disturb the animal and hinder the rescue team's work.



Once the dolphin is restrained, it should be moved to the shore for physical evaluation. Depending on the situation, it may be transferred to a boat or another suitable transport method.

If the water is less than 1.20 meters deep, wear boots or shoes to avoid stingray injuries.

If you don't have them, shuffle your feet as you walk.



Signs to Watch For During Dolphin Restraint

If the dolphin is on land, place it on a padded, moist, and shaded surface to proceed with veterinary assessment.



How to Avoid Putting Yourself at Risk

During the procedure, avoid inhaling the dolphin's exhalation, as pathogens may be transmitted. **Wear a face mask or covering.**



If the dolphin shows **tremors or spasms**, adjust its position, prioritizing the animal's comfort.

General Condition

Breathing: Should not exceed 8 breaths per minute. Ideally, the dolphin should breathe once or twice per minute.

Hydration: Keep the dolphin moist at all times, especially the pectoral fins and tail fluke.

Always avoid water entering the blowhole.



General Physical Assessment of the River Dolphin



Transfer to a Rehabilitation Facility
If the wounds or trauma are deep or severe, contact the appropriate organization, request a veterinary evaluation, and select a suitable means of transport.

Wounds or Trauma
Check for any abnormalities on the skin, eyes, or fins. Take photographic records.



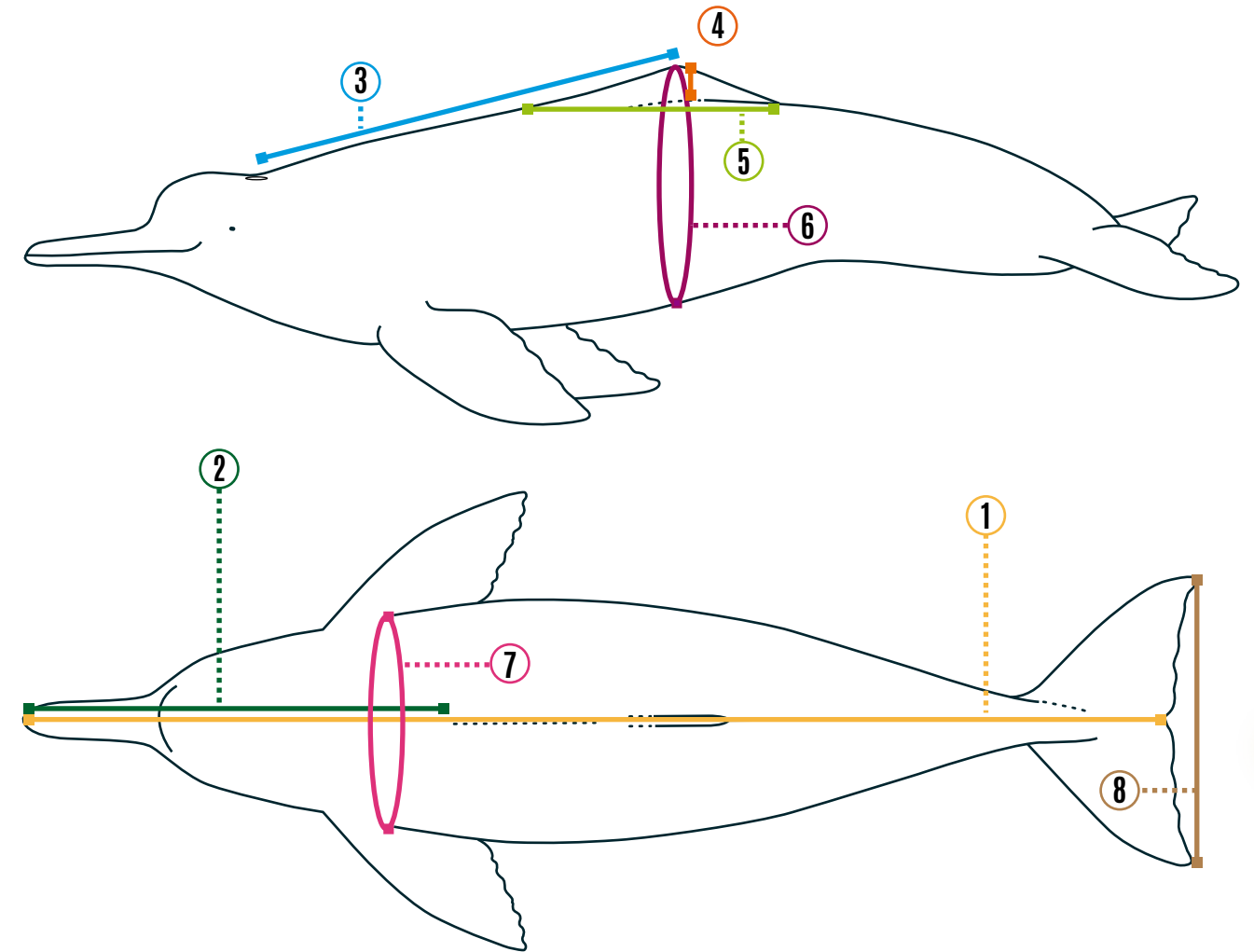
Weight
If a scale is available, weigh the animal. If not, estimate its weight.



Morphometric Measurements

- ① Tip of the upper jaw to the deepest point of the caudal notch
- ② Tip of the upper jaw to the anterior edge of the dorsal fin
- ③ Center of the blowhole to the tip of the dorsal fin
- ④ Height of the dorsal fin
- ⑤ Base of the dorsal fin
- ⑥ Maximum body circumference
- ⑦ Body circumference at axillary level
- ⑧ Width of the fluke (from tip to tip)

*All measurements must be taken in centimeters.



Transporting the Dolphin Out of Water

During a dolphin stranding rescue, handling is critical for the animal's stability, as this is the first time it experiences being completely out of the water.



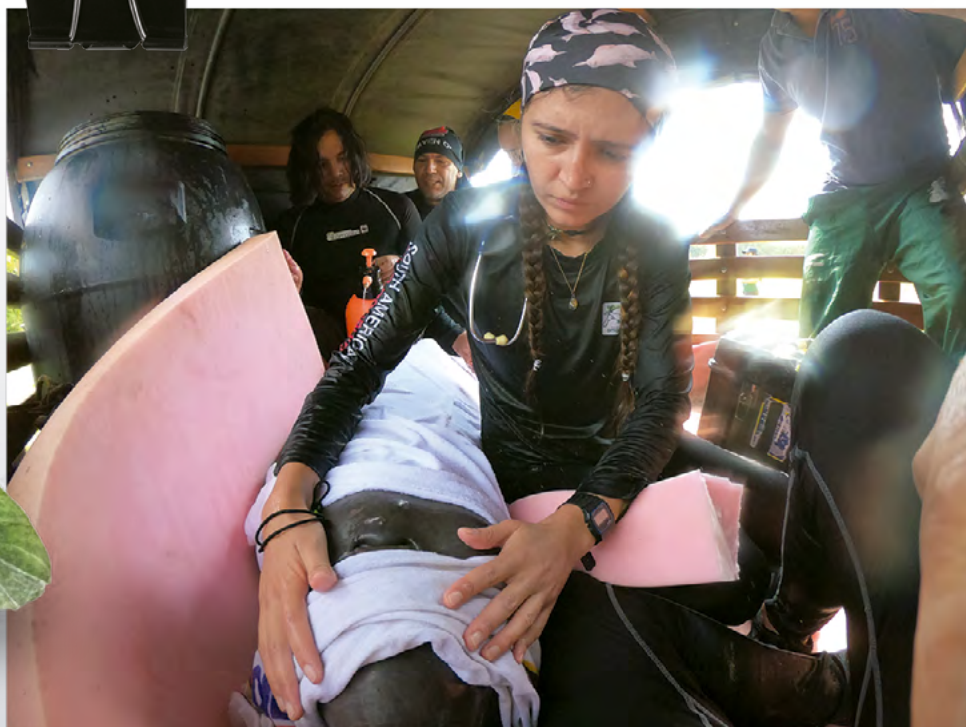
To the Shore

- Before moving the dolphin onto a mat or support surface, wet it and keep it moist.
- Do not place the dolphin on hot or hard surfaces.



To a Boat

- Use a stretcher or folded tarp.
- Avoid sudden movements and support the dolphin's head securely.
- Try not to transport the dolphin in boats with partitions or directly over them; **cover surfaces if the vessel has divisions.**



To a Truck or Van

- Place the stretcher on a padded surface.
- Spray the body with water at least every 5 minutes. If possible, shield it from direct wind exposure.



To a Plane or Helicopter

- Only if strictly necessary.
- Requires official authorization and trained personnel.

Regardless of the transport method, always keep in mind:



● Avoid making noise.

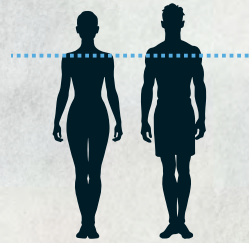
● Ensure the dolphin's comfort.

● Change the dolphin's position periodically.

● Keep it moist and shaded.

Releasing the Dolphin

Accompany the dolphin until it swims on its own. Monitor its behavior for **30 minutes**: Ensure it is breathing properly, swimming without difficulty, and not returning to the shore.



Release it at a safe and sufficiently deep point in the river.

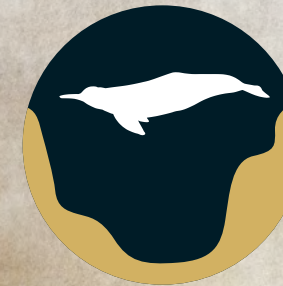
Recommendations for Saving Lives



Monitor streams and shallow areas, especially during prolonged dry seasons.



Participate in rescue efforts — your report can save lives.



Quickly report any stranded dolphin to environmental authorities, local NGOs, firefighters, or Civil Defense.



Support environmental patrols — there are community training projects for monitoring in critical areas.

In Case a Dead Dolphin Is Found



The dolphin must not be consumed or used in any way, as it may represent a health hazard.



Whenever possible, notify environmental authorities and relevant organizations. This includes the South American River Dolphin Initiative (SARDI), such as Fundación Omacha, Proyecto Sotalia, Instituto Mamirauá, Faunagua, Solinia, WWF, Neotropical Cuencas, among others.

1.5 meters



Dead dolphins should be buried in a safe location, away from water sources, at a minimum depth of 1.5 meters.

Important: Dragging the animal into the river current is not recommended, because it may affect water quality and pose health risks to other animals and people.

To learn more about this and other procedures, refer to the following recommended reading:

GUIDE FOR THE RESPONSE TO STRANDED AQUATIC MAMMALS IN COLOMBIA



