

The return of the Irrawaddy dolphin

Spotted in Chilika's Rambha sector after 30 years following eviction of illegal prawn enclosures

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The first sighting of the endangered Irrawaddy dolphins in the Rambha sector of Chilika lake in three decades has brought much cheer to nature lovers.

Authority's move

The rare sighting of the endangered mammal earlier this week is a result of the Chilika Development Authority's (CDA) removing illegal prawn enclosures from the vast lake waters leading to unhindered movement of the dolphins.

Ganjam district

"We have almost completed the eviction of enclosures under Ganjam district. The heartening aspect of the drive is that locals have seen four dolphins in Rambha for the first time since the late 1980s. The beautiful aquatic mammal is expected to colonise the area again," said CDA chief executive Susanta Nanda.



Good news: An endangered Irrawaddy dolphin spotted in the Rambha sector of Chilika waters. ■ SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

The World Wide Fund for Nature representatives managed to capture photographs of the dolphins.

"The dolphins did not have free movement due to the presence of prawn enclosures. Their prey base

had also been squeezed. They stopped coming to Rambha in recent decades. Rambha sector is one of extreme ends of Chilika. It was a very satisfying moment to spot them. If the dolphins can travel up to Rambha,

their habitat will only get better in the coming days," said Mr. Nanda.

In a massive eviction drive, the CDA cleared almost 4,000 hectare of encroachment from the Ganjam district portion of the lake alone. Substantial enclosures detected in the lake at Khordha district jurisdiction were also weeded out. Satellite imageries found 14,590 hectare of the lagoon under manmade *gheries* (enclosures) for illegal prawn cultivation. The CDA is likely to start eviction in Puri district from next week.

natural abode

According to the CDA, Chilika is the natural abode of the highly endangered Irrawaddy dolphin (*Orcaella brevirostris*). The total population of these animals in the world is estimated to be less than 7,500. Of these, the highest – 6,400 – was reported from Bangladesh. The population in Chilika is considered to be the highest

single lagoonal population.

Chilika had registered a marginal drop in population of Irrawaddy dolphins from 144 in 2015 to 134 this year. Dolphins are usually seen in Satapada sector of the lake.

Unregulated boating

"Rambha is the ideal sector for dolphins to play, flock and mate because of the stillness of the water in the bay area. Dolphins had been under stress in Chilika due to unregulated boating by tourists as well as illegal prawn enclosures. Now, with enclosures being weeded out, the primary hurdle for dolphin movement has been taken care of. The enforcement of boating regulation as per the CDA will also be made stricter," said Michael Peters, senior programme coordinator, WWF-India's marine conservation unit in Odisha.

Chilika, known for its exquisite natural beauty, attracts many tourists because of its dolphin population.