



THE ISSUE

The iconic Chinese white dolphin (*Sousa chinensis*) has had precipitous local abundance declines in Hong Kong waters with over 70% loss in the past 16 years. With reproduction rates remaining low, this raises specific concerns that the species' disappearance in Hong Kong waters, a critical part of home range for the broader Pearl River Delta dolphin population, is imminent, highlighting the urgent need to conserve the remaining core habitats for dolphins.

The Pearl River Delta population of the Chinese white dolphin, which is believed to be the largest globally, is currently estimated to number only 2,000 individuals – a critical level that, if current decreasing trends continue, puts the species at risk of going extinct locally. Within the Greater Bay Area, the dolphins are threatened by seven major human impacts:

1. habitat loss and degradation from coastal development;
2. prey depletion as a result of habitat destruction and unsustainable, destructive and illegal fishing;
3. underwater noise disturbance from coastal development and marine traffic;
4. boat traffic and vessel strikes, particularly with fast-moving vessels;
5. pollutants and toxins from runoff and near-shore human activities;
6. entanglement in fishing gear from non-selective fishing; and
7. sea level rise associated with climate change.

WHAT WE ARE DOING

The decreasing dolphin numbers in Hong Kong is an urgent call for protecting critical dolphin feeding and socializing habitats in western and southern Lantau waters – which are the few remaining core habitats in the PRD – to be managed as a development-free Dolphin Conservation Management Zone by 2024. The Lantau Dolphin Conservation Management Zone, along with other critical dolphin habitats identified in Hong Kong waters recommended in the [*Emergency Action Plan for the Pearl River Delta Population of the Chinese White Dolphin*](#) by WWF and partners, will contribute to Hong Kong's ongoing efforts to expand the marine protected area system (MPA) to cover 30% of Hong Kong's marine environment by 2030, through the gazettement of a network of science-based strict no-take reserves, fisheries management zones, community-based fishery reserves, and other MPA designations benefitting from well-enforced and science-based management.

The dolphins have been found shifting their favoured habitat southwards since 2015, likely in response to disturbance associated with multiple coastal development projects underway in north and northeast Lantau waters. Busy marine traffic is also potentially impacting local cetaceans, especially along the two existing major vessel routes, namely Adamasta and West Lamma Channels. Some researchers suggest that small boat strikes may be as deadly to

cetaceans as large vessel strikes. Vessel collision appears to impact more severely on the more open-water finless porpoise (*Neophocaena phocaenoides*), as the total number of porpoise strandings last year accounted for as much as 20% of the estimated population within Hong Kong waters.

On top of the challenging conditions off south Lantau stemming from boat and ship noise disturbance and potential collisions with vessels, a sound propagation modelling study conducted by WWF-Hong Kong last year estimated that the soon-commencing pile-driving for the construction of liquefied natural gas terminal off southeast Soko Islands is likely to significantly disturb dolphins in the area, including those found in the proposed South Lantau Marine Park.

This activity further threatens the shrinking local dolphin population. Much of the critical dolphin habitats that have been identified by the emergency action plan and WWF's underwater sound studies are either not within currently committed marine parks, or are poorly managed. For instance, the proposed marine park as a mitigation area for the Third Airport Runway construction does not cover any identified critical dolphin habitat. They are not utilizing the reserve habitat as they did before the construction and there is no sign of their return.

OUR ASK

To stabilize and recover the remaining dolphin population, WWF strongly urges the government to take significant remediation and conservation action now. WWF proposes the following measures be adopted as a matter of urgency:

- Expand and connect the existing marine parks to establish a science-based, well-connected, and well-managed network of critical foraging, socializing, and resting habitats. By 2024, establish a Dolphin Conservation Management Zone across the Western and Southern Lantau waters, with critical foraging and resting habitats strictly managed in terms of vessel traffic and speed;
- Set up a community-based working group that includes relevant government authorities, academics, NGOs, local community, dolphin-tourism companies, fishers, and village leaders to co-manage the Dolphin Conservation Management Zone; and,
- Require development projects to robustly assess potential threats from proposed construction works, especially noise impacts, on local Chinese white dolphin in the Environmental Impact Assessment.