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Species Fact Sheet:

# Snubfin dolphin



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## Snubfin Dolphin

*Orcaella heinsohni*

In 2005 a new species of dolphin was found in Australian waters, the Australian snubfin dolphin. The discovery of a new mammal is extremely rare. Until recently the snubfin dolphin was thought to be an Irrawaddy dolphin, which is found in coastal areas and major rivers of south-east Asia, and is in serious decline.

The snubfin dolphin is Australia's only endemic dolphin, meaning it is unique to northern Australia. Coastal and river dolphins are among the most threatened species of mammal in the world.

Snubfin dolphins, like all dolphin species, are toothed cetaceans and therefore have one blow hole and are generally smaller in size compared with the baleen cetaceans like the humpback whale.



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## Conservation status

The World Conservation Union (IUCN) Redlist of Threatened Species:  
Data deficient

Australian Government - Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999:  
Data deficient

## Did you know?

- Snubfin dolphins were named after George Heinsohn, an Australian biologist who worked at James Cook University in the 1960s and 1970s - *Orcaella heinsohni*.
- Snubfin dolphins are cetaceans, like whales, and have a blow hole, which is the equivalent to a human nostril that they breathe through. They must come to the surface of the water to breathe; when they surface they blow air out from their lungs.
- Toothed cetaceans use echo-location to identify each other and prey. They emit high-frequency clicks in the direction their head is pointing. When the echo returns they can determine their direction and distance from the object and its size, shape and texture.

## Distribution and habitat

The dolphins are strongly linked to the mouths of tidal rivers and are usually found close to the coast, within 10 kilometres of land and river mouths. They are only found in reasonably shallow water, less than 15 metres deep. Populations are thought to be small and isolated.

The range of the species may extend into Papua New Guinea, but the majority live in northern Australian waters from the Kimberley in the west, across the Top End and as far east as Yeppoon in Queensland.

Coastal and river dolphins are the most threatened dolphins worldwide and effective conservation actions are limited by a lack of knowledge about the snubfin dolphin.

## Ecology and life cycle

Recent studies in Queensland have shown that snubfin dolphins are a distinct species endemic to Australia. The snubfin dolphin is tri-coloured, with a dark coloured back, lighter brown sides and a white belly. They are identifiable by a rounded snout, very different from other Australian dolphins, and snubby dorsal fin. Little is known about reproduction among snubfin dolphins but it is thought to be similar to the Irrawaddy dolphin.

Snubfin dolphins are shy and elusive, do not bow ride and are difficult to study.

## Threats

Recent research in North Queensland by Dr Guido Parra has shown that coastal dolphins are vulnerable to human activities in and around coastal areas. Bycatch, marine debris, habitat alteration, pollution and climate change may threaten our coastal dolphins.

Bycatch is the accidental capture of non-target fish and other marine animals. It has been revealed as one of the greatest global threats facing dolphins, porpoises, and whales. For coastal and estuarine species such as the Australian snubfin, coastal net fisheries are likely to pose a particular threat of entanglement and drowning.

Loss of habitat and damage of remaining habitat is linked to increased human activity in marine and coastal environments. Poorly planned coastal development, and a significant increase in the number of users of coastal areas, may drive away the dolphins that would normally live in the coastal waters of northern Australia.

## Conservation action

Because so little is known about Australia's coastal dolphins, research is essential in order to identify important habitat, collect baseline information and determine if the different populations are related to each other.

Using boat-based surveys, photo-identification and tissue sampling methods, vital information will be gathered about the number of dolphins, what they do and where they live along the northern coast of Australia.

The overall objective of this project is to better understand the ecology of the snubfin dolphin in order to conserve and manage it in Australian waters.

Snubfin dolphins are a WWF-Australia flagship species. The snubfin is an ambassador for biodiversity conservation in north Australian coastal waters. The species was chosen because it is affected by the same threats that impact on many species, and inhabits places that many other species share. Plans are currently underway to raise awareness and funding to support strategic conservation work on this unique species. Together with partners in government, Indigenous organisations and the business sector, WWF is working to ensure that the snubfin dolphin is secure in its home waters.

## How you can help

- Keep records of the dolphins you see, including the number of individuals, the species and location, and forward information onto Samantha Vine, Marine Flagship Species Coordinator, WWF-Australia on [svine@wwf.org.au](mailto:svine@wwf.org.au)
- Ensure no nets, equipment or rubbish is lost or thrown overboard when fishing or boating
- Choose sustainable seafood such as Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) certified products to reduce the impact of bycatch. If you buy or ask for seafood that comes from sustainable sources you are helping to protect our marine environment and the species that depend on it such as the coastal dolphins
- Help reduce climate change and the impacts that it will have on coastal dolphins and all threatened species. Be energy wise; turn appliances off at the power point and switch to green power