

## Project Update: April 2011

Initial discussions were carried out with the local communities and the local NGO, Khata Community Forestry Coordination (CFCC). Members of this local implementing partner were informed about the major species of the project and implementation approach. They were also made aware about their roles and responsibilities as communities residing along the banks of this critical aquatic corridor. Eco-club members and coordinators of these clubs were also a part of the discussion. The local expectations were elaborately discussed during the initiation. Adequate care was taken to maintain a balance between project priorities and local expectations. A work plan was developed based on the discussions among the participants of the discussion. It took into consideration the agriculture calendar of the communities and the school's academic calendar to decide on the timing of activities.

The development of work plan was followed by reconnaissance surveys along the riverbank communities and with the park staff. The target species of the present project were the main focus of the surveys. Following the monsoon floods of the last season, the water level in Geruwa-Karnali (the eastern branch) has reduced drastically. It has resulted in absence of dolphins in this branch. Locals reported very few instances of dolphin sightings in the last 3 months (February, March and April 2011). This is largely due to the fact that the river section at Kothiaghat near the India-Nepal border is highly disturbed by vehicles and human movements where were absent in the previous years as a Pantoon bridge (floating bridge) was used to cross the river. The disturbances have practically isolated the upper section of Karnali and fragmented the aquatic biodiversity therein with that of the lower sections of the river inside Katarniaghat Wildlife Sanctuary in India, which has a rich population of dolphins, muggars, gharials and otters. At the same time, reconnaissance surveys also highlight that fact that despite the Kauralia (western branch of Karnali) has the higher water level; the large aquatic carnivores have not yet been sighted in the western channel.

Regarding otters, muggars and gharials; surveys have not carried out yet largely due to that fact that the season for gharial survey could not be made use of. Despite this, consultations with the park staffs brought out the fact that a total of four gharials were frequently sighted basking in the Laguna Machan area of the Bardia National Park along the Geruwa-Karnali channel. Gharials have usually been sighted at this spot in previous surveys also. Muggars were directly sighted on numerous occasions especially near the Orai-Geruwa confluence. This section was also identified as otter habitat in the previous project.



The next phase of the project will include survey for Ganges River dolphins in the low water levels of May-June before the monsoon as it provides a true population for the species. Next surveys for otters, muggars and gharials will be carried out during October-January when the water levels start to recede in Karnali. Next phase will also include development of awareness materials and dissemination of the same prior to the onset of monsoon when schools close. The awareness programs will be carried out through the local implementing partner CFCC-Khata.

