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Honourable Mark A. Villar
Secretary of the Department of Public
Works and Highways
Bonifacio Drive, Port Area
Metro Manila, Philippines

31 August 2020

Subject: Irrawaddy dolphins

Dear Secretary Villar,

Greetings to you and your staff. We hope you are keeping well during these uncertain times.

We are writing on behalf of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) to express concern about the likely impacts of the proposed Panay-Guimaras-Negros (PGN) Bridges Project on biodiversity in the Guimaras and Iloilo Straits, and in particular, on the survival of a Critically Endangered population of Irrawaddy dolphins (*Orcaella brevirostris*).¹

IUCN recognizes the importance of connecting the Panay, Negros and Guimaras Islands to facilitate efficient and safe inter-island transport and thus improve the region's economy. However, we are concerned that construction of the entrances and exits of these bridges in Pulupandan-Bago on Negros and Buenavista on Guimaras could threaten vital habitat of the Critically Endangered dolphins. Studies conducted by various research groups indicate these areas support the greatest densities of dolphins who use the areas for feeding, resting, giving birth and nurturing their calves. Construction of the bridge entrances and exits could destroy the habitat and pollute surrounding areas with disruptive noise. Dolphins, like bats, rely on sound and use echolocation to navigate, find prey and communicate with one another in social groups.

Irrawaddy dolphins and their habitat are protected under the Wildlife Conservation Act (Republic Act 9147), the Philippine Fisheries Code (Republic Act 8550 as amended by Republic Act 10654) and Fisheries Administrative Order (FAO) Nos. 185-1 and 208. In addition to Irrawaddy dolphins, the coastal waters of Buenavista provide important habitat for dugongs (*Dugong dugon*), which are Critically Endangered in the Philippines and protected by the Wildlife Conservation Act and Administrative Order No. 55.

The Irrawaddy dolphin population in the Iloilo-Guimaras Straits is very small. Studies conducted by Silliman University, University of St. La Salle, and Tropical Marine Research and Conservation, indicate that only 10-30 remain, with their core habitat limited to the Pulupandan-Bago estuary and coastal waters of Buenavista. The dolphins play an integral part in the lives of fishermen in Iloilo, Guimaras and Negros, who use sightings of the dolphins to help them locate concentrations of fish and shrimp. In a global context, Iloilo and Guimaras Straits are recognized as Important Marine Mammal Areas² (IMMAs). The Iloilo-

¹ <https://www.iucnredlist.org/species/123095978/123095988>

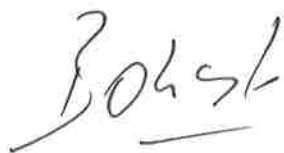
² <https://www.marinemammalhabitat.org/portfolio-item/iloilo-guimaras-straits/>

Guimaras Straits population is one of only three known isolated populations of Irrawaddy dolphins in the Philippines. The other two populations inhabit Malampaya Sound, Palawan (also Critically Endangered) and coastal waters of Quezon.

IUCN understands the importance of the inter-island bridges for economic development. However, in the event that the government decides to proceed with this project, we request that planners investigate and consider alternative locations for the bridge entrances and exits or bridge alignments that would allow for the safe and efficient transport of people and goods without sacrificing the region's biodiversity. Ensuring that Irrawaddy dolphins and dugongs survive in the Iloilo-Guimaras Straits will not only contribute to the conservation of global biodiversity but will also help to preserve the natural heritage of the Ilonggo people.

We thank you for your kind attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Dr Bruno Oberle
Director General IUCN



Dr Jon Paul Rodríguez
Chair, IUCN Species Survival Commission

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