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ROLEX AND NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC PERPETUAL PLANET AMAZON EXPEDITION: THROUGH THE TRIBUTARIES

FERNANDO TRUJILLO & MARÍA JIMENA VALDERRAMA: RESEARCHERS' WORK LEADS TO BETTER CONSERVATION AND INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION FOR THREATENED RIVER DOLPHINS



National Geographic Explorer Fernando Trujillo counting pink river dolphins in Colombia. Trujillo's expedition covers the upper reaches of the Amazon River, including tributaries in Colombia, Ecuador, Brazil and Peru. The expedition aims to estimate the abundance of river dolphins and evaluate the pollution within the rivers.

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The river dolphins that National Geographic Explorers Fernando Trujillo and María Jimena Valderrama are studying can be found throughout the Amazon River and its tributaries. Trujillo and Valderrama's expedition will take them to seven different rivers across four countries.

© Fernando Trujillo/National Geographic



National Geographic Explorer Fernando Trujillo and a local veterinarian in the water with the only Amazon river dolphin in captivity at the Quistococha Zoo, Peru. Trujillo earned the nickname "Omacha" from the local indigenous people, meaning "the dolphin that became a man", for his devotion to the charismatic animals.

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Scouring the rushing, murky waters of an Amazonian tributary with keen eyes, National Geographic Explorers Fernando Trujillo and María Jimena Valderrama are ready to spring to action at the first glimpse of what they are looking for: the flash of a pink fin. They have spent the last year studying pink and grey river dolphins across the Amazon, surveying over 1,000 kilometres of river to assess the health of its most charismatic residents. The Rolex and National Geographic Perpetual Planet Amazon Expedition saw Trujillo and Valderrama following the dolphins across international borders, where they were relieved to find them thriving in many areas, but worried at the high levels of heavy metals they discovered in the dolphins. The team is working with governments and local communities to design effective conservation strategies to protect the populations of these unique creatures and their river ecosystems.

"I STARTED WITH A VERY ROMANTIC APPROACH TO TRY TO SAVE THE RIVER DOLPHINS IN THE AMAZON, AND THEN I DISCOVERED THAT THERE WAS AN OPPORTUNITY TO CONSERVE NOT ONLY THESE WONDERFUL MAMMALS BUT ALSO THE ENTIRE ECOSYSTEM."

Fernando Trujillo, marine biologist and National Geographic Explorer





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Calling to each other from atop tiny wooden boats, National Geographic Explorer Fernando Trujillo and his team lay out a ring of nets. When the barrier is complete and everyone is in place, Trujillo dives into the murky waters to try and catch what is hiding in the dense sediment: a pink river dolphin. Under the gentle hand and expert guidance of aquatic wildlife veterinarian and National Geographic Explorer María Jimena Valderrama, the team conduct a quick health check of the dolphin, attach a satellite tag, and release it back into the rushing river as unobtrusively as possible.

As part of the Rolex and National Geographic Perpetual Planet Amazon Expedition, Trujillo and Valderrama travelled through Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Brazil to study river dolphins in the Amazon and its tributaries. Working with trained local people, the team followed the dolphins through seven rivers, surveying their overall population, conducting in-depth health analyses and installing satellite transmitters to track a small number of dolphins.

Trujillo and Valderrama were heartened to discover larger dolphin populations than expected. Their preliminary data revealed more than 3,000 pink boto river dolphins and almost 4,000 of the smaller, grey Tucuxi dolphins in their study area. Tracking data also helped them to identify key areas where the dolphins feed and mate, which will help guide policy makers to take actions to protect these sites.

As a young researcher, Trujillo's dedication and deep connection to the dolphins earned him the nickname of "Omacha" from the indigenous Tikuna people, which means the dolphin who turned into a man to protect the river dolphins. "That was such an honour," he says. It inspired him to establish the Omacha foundation, which promotes the conservation and sustainable use of the Amazon River ecosystem.

During the yearly rainy season, much of the Amazon rainforest floods, and the pink river dolphins are well-adapted to travelling through these seasonal wetlands, making them one of the Amazon's most wide-ranging species. Their lengthy migrations and long lives expose them to myriad threats as they move through the rivers, from pollution and boat traffic to conflict with fishermen so, as Valderrama says, "If we examine the health of the dolphins, we can see the health of the river." The Omacha Foundation's work on the Rolex and National Geographic Perpetual Planet Amazon Expedition will help paint a picture of the health of the entire Amazon ecosystem.

Pollution is one of the biggest threats to the dolphins. The pollution seeps into rivers where it accumulates through the food chain and can reach high levels in the bodies of top predators like dolphins. Stopping these sources of pollution is key to conserving the dolphins and their river ecosystem.



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Trujillo and Valderrama collected tissue samples to measure the pollution in the dolphins' blubber. These tests revealed "high levels", Valderrama says. This is a concern not only for the dolphins, but also for the local communities that fish on the river. However, Trujillo remains optimistic and hopes that, with Rolex's support, they can raise awareness on the issue, allowing the astonishingly resilient ecosystem to clean itself. "If humans change their ways, I am hopeful that heavy metals could be cleaned out of the water in less than a decade."

Trujillo and Valderrama are working closely with local communities to find conservation solutions that benefit both the dolphins and the 9,000 residents across the study area who rely on fisheries for their livelihood. Conflict between fishermen and dolphins flare up when dolphins become trapped in nets or eat fish from their catch, but with education and training, the fishermen are coming to appreciate the dolphins. "Now they know the dolphins are important, and the relationship is better," Valderrama says.

The team are also developing conservation agreements to restore fish populations and recover collapsing fisheries, while avoiding the use of nets in areas that are crucial for the dolphins. They hope that, with the support of Rolex's Perpetual Planet Initiative, they can protect the majestic river dolphins and restore the health of the river ecosystem for generations to come.

However, despite the team's promising work, recently more than 150 dolphins perished in Lake Tefé due to record-high water temperatures during the Amazon's dry season. This has further highlighted the urgent need to prevent the decline of river dolphin populations worldwide and, tragic though it was, has paved the way for trailblazing international collaboration. In October 2023, Trujillo led a meeting on the global declaration for the protection of river dolphins and their rivers in Bogota, Colombia, where he was joined by other experts, ministers and senior officials from countries in South America and Asia that are home to river dolphins. This meeting resulted in the signing of a first-of-its-kind declaration between eleven countries, committing to develop research-based, transboundary solutions to protect river dolphins around the world.

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