

THE AMAZON BASIN

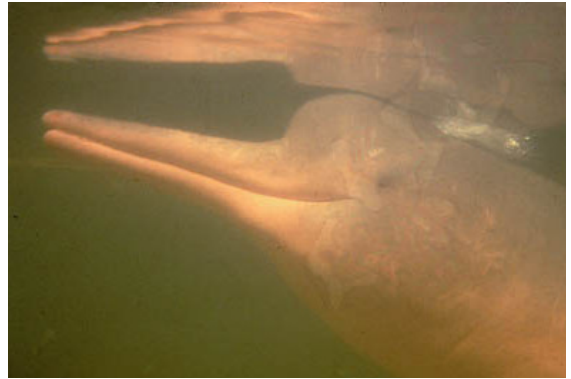
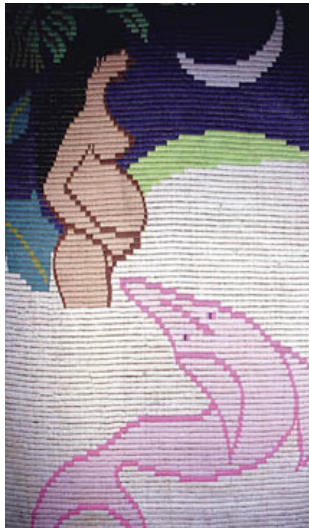
In search of the pink dolphin

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65 million years ago the Platanistidae, the present river dolphins, lived in the Thethys, an immense tropical sea covering today's continents. They swam among the gentle waves, now and

...“The river took us over. After so many problems it was a real pleasure to enjoy the silence of nature, the perfume of the flowers, the gentle rocking of the water as we penetrated into the deep heart of this vivid green forest. We were surrounded by the infinite. The immensity of the sky, the majestic foliage of the trees, the freedom of the Amazon River infiltrating everywhere, spreading its arms in an intricate, boundless labyrinth... Its impetuous charge towards the sea, where finally it would be reunited with all its universe... And our boat...so small, but accepted and respected by this imposing environment” ... [No Limits - April 1993]

then leaping out of the water, just as the sea dolphins do.

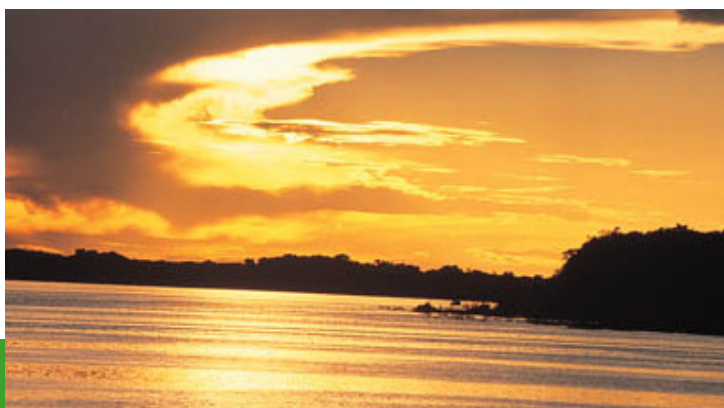


But one day the sea dried up and the land emerged. The survivors of the Platanistidae family, once very prolific, were the only ones who managed to adapt to the difficult life of the river. Today there are only four genera left: the Lipotes in China, the Platanista in India, the Inia and the Pontoporia in Brazil.

The *Inia geoffrensis* lives in the Amazon River. At a talk given by Professor Pilleri, the internationally famous expert on fresh-water dolphins, I was fascinated by the fact that the "boto" as the Brazilians call it, is a

pink dolphin with strange features. I decided to leave for the Amazon to find that strange animal. But in Manaus, before tracking him down, I ran up against enormous obstacles in organi-

zing the expedition...! As always, I had started from nothing, from a bizarre desire and an insatiable curiosity. I remained in the capital of the Amazonas state for over three months. I just had enough money to live on. I certainly couldn't pay for the boat, crew, petrol, food and fishermen able to indicate suitable places for my search. Not to mention equipment for creating a natural bay for a dolphin to live in for a few days and a helicopter to take the aerial photos indispensable for the article I would have written on my return to Italy. There would be 15 people participating in the trip. At that time I did not belong to an organisation which could



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have helped me out with money. I would have had to provide for everything myself, although I didn't know anything about river sailing... And the Amazon River certainly wasn't just any river! In the end I managed to obtain everything I needed with a special form of barter...

So one month later, I finally found myself swimming with "Legal", the dolphin, in a beautiful natural bay along the Rio Tapajos. I was to remain there for eighteen days, learning about the particularities which distinguished him from the sea dolphins. One afternoon I gently grasped his dorsal fin and put my left hand under his stomach. He flicked his tail and set off. I relaxed my body, closed my eyes and, using the only points of contact I had and being very careful about his pectoral fins, I gave myself over to his sinuous movements.

Then the researchers of the National Research Institute of the Amazon, who were marking him as part of a census they were carrying out, let him back into the great river... It was sunset as his small shape slowly disappeared over the horizon.

In Brazil the dolphin of the Amazon River has become famous not only for the colour of its skin, but also for a curious legend originating among the Indians of the forests. Over the years, the story has had many versions. Today, the people of the Amazon basin recount that:

"... in the evening, the "boto" is transformed into a handsome man dressed all in white and wearing a black hat. You always meet him at parties and the women, seduced by his magical fascination, fall madly in love with him and become pregnant. This enchanted being then turns back into a dolphin again and mysteriously disappears".

Many really believe in this tale, but others use it to conceal extramarital "affairs": "It was the dolphin! It's all his fault... he gave me this child one night!" the women often say to their husbands. And if they're lucky, nothing more is said and the new baby becomes one of the family.

But because of this legend, in the Amazon basin most people feel a little frightened of the strange pink animal. They respect it, fear it and keep away from it. So the fresh-water dolphin of the Amazon River is not hunted as it is in India and China where it now risks extinction.