



Open Letter to the Delegations of Member Countries and the Secretariat of the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species (CMS), and to the Governments of Brazil, Bolivia, and Peru

“For the Conservation of Amazonian Migratory Catfish in the Madeira River Basin”



Summary

Fishermen and women fishers from five sub-basins of the Madeira system (Madre de Dios, Tahuamanu, Beni, Mamoré, and Madeira), meeting in Cochabamba in February 2026, express our deep concern about the rapid decline of Amazonian migratory catfish. These species sustain food security, local economies, and the ecological connectivity of the Amazon. We identified three main threats affecting this fishery in the Madeira basin shared by Bolivia, Brazil, and Peru: hydroelectric dams that disrupt migrations, gold mining that contaminates rivers with mercury and degrades aquatic habitats, and the increase in illegal fishing. We call upon the governments of Brazil, Bolivia, and Peru, and the CMS delegations, to take coordinated and urgent action to protect these migratory fish, strengthen fisheries governance, and support community-led conservation initiatives.

Cochabamba, Bolivia – February 2026

Dear delegations of the member countries and the Secretariat of the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species (CMS):

Dear representatives of the governments of Brazil, Bolivia, and Peru:

We, fishers from six delegations representing five sub-basins of the Madeira system (Madre de Dios, Tahuamanu, Beni, Mamoré, and Madeira), gathered at the First Meeting of Fishers of the Madeira Basin, in collaboration with the Amazon Waters Alliance in Cochabamba, address this collective letter to you.

We, fishers, live alongside the large migratory Amazonian catfish in the Madeira Basin on a daily basis. These fish play a fundamental role in the connectivity of Amazonian rivers and are also essential for the food security and sovereignty of many fishing and indigenous communities

We wish to express our full support for the international effort to organize CMS COP15, to be held in Campo

Grande, Brazil, in March 2026. We especially value that during this meeting the Regional Action Plan for Amazonian Migratory Catfish will be discussed and, we hope, approved, as its objectives coincide with many of our local priorities.

We also express our support for the Belém Manifest for the conservation of Amazonian migratory catfish in the Amazon basin, signed in Belém, Brazil, in January 2026, where more than 35 fishers from 5 countries of the Amazon basin discussed and established priorities for the management and conservation of these species throughout the Amazon, based on the experiences they often already implement.

At the same time, we want to highlight some specific concerns and priorities for the Madeira Basin that were expanded upon during our workshop in Cochabamba. Although they refer to this particular basin, we believe they are relevant to the entire Amazon.

In recent years, we have witnessed firsthand a dramatic decline in Amazonian migratory catfish in the Madeira Basin, especially those species that undertake long-distance migrations, such as the dorado catfish (called plateado in some areas), the barbachata (called chicotillo in some sub-basins), and the pirahiba (called saltón in some countries) (all species of the genus *Brachyplatystoma*). This decline is mainly due to various human pressures that severely affect the rivers and the livelihoods of those who depend on them. Among the main threats, we identify hydroelectric dams, gold mining, and illegal fishing.

Infrastructure and Connectivity of the Basin

The construction and operation of hydroelectric dams in the middle Madeira River basin poses a serious threat to the connectivity and integrity of Amazonian rivers, and in particular to migratory catfish.

There is ample scientific evidence that current mitigation measures at these dams are not sufficiently effective and do not allow the passage of pre-adults and adults of most migratory species. This has been demonstrated through strontium (Sr) isotope analysis of fish otoliths, as well as through participatory fisheries monitoring programs. The disruption of their migratory routes jeopardizes their reproduction and, therefore, our livelihoods.



Therefore:

- We urge governments to urgently address the impacts of dams already in operation.
- We request the establishment of cross-border agreements that allow for the implementation of coordinated mitigation measures.
- We request that consideration be given to halting the construction of new dams in the middle Madeira River basin, as this could critically endanger the livelihoods of fishing communities in the three countries.

Regarding the species included in Appendix II of the CMS, we propose specific conservation actions. In particular, for the Amazonian gilded catfish (dorado/dourada) (*Brachyplatystoma rousseauxii*), we propose:

- Establishing a trinational committee to coordinate conservation measures and mitigation of impacts.
- Developing a cross-border management plan to ensure the species' recovery.
- Strengthening mitigation systems at dams, as current fish passage systems are ineffective.
- Evaluating the manual relocation of pre-adults to the Amazonian headwaters as an emergency measure to maintain the species' reproduction.
- Evaluate and effectively regulate juvenile fisheries in the Amazon River estuary.
- Establish, in consensus with fishers, a total ban on fishing for adult fish in the Amazon headwaters until the proven recovery of populations.
- Harmonize regulations for transboundary gilded catfish fishing.

As the fishing sector, we also want to actively contribute to the solutions. We commit to:

- strengthening citizen oversight through local and regional groups;
- promoting the creation of a Madeira Observatory to generate and share information on the state of the rivers;
- actively participating in fish relocation initiatives as a gesture of commitment to their conservation;
- protecting breeding individuals that reach the headwaters of the basin;
- conducting participatory fisheries monitoring;
- collaborating on research into catfish migration routes.

Gold Mining

The pollution of our rivers is a silent but devastating threat. Day after day, we witness how illegal gold mining destroys aquatic and riparian ecosystems, releasing mercury that then transforms into methylmercury, a highly toxic substance that accumulates in water, sediments, fish, and people.

Mining physically transforms Amazonian rivers. It changes the natural transport of sediments, alters riverbeds, and destroys riparian forests. These transformations degrade aquatic habitats and directly affect migratory catfish, which lose migratory routes, breeding grounds, and food sources.

Furthermore, methylmercury bioaccumulates in aquatic organisms and biomagnifies along the food chain, reaching high levels in carnivorous fish such as catfish and, ultimately, in the people who consume them.

Therefore, we request:

- coordinated actions among countries to reduce mercury pollution;
- compliance with the Minamata Convention;
- strengthened environmental oversight;
- The zoning of mining activity to avoid impacts on protected areas and Indigenous territories;
- The development of cleaner mining mechanisms;



- Policies to value fish from healthy rivers;
- Mercury monitoring programs in the environment and in fish, including local stakeholders such as fishers and citizen environmental monitors.

We also request follow-up on compliance with the resolutions issued by environmental courts in northern La Paz (Bolivia) and Madre de Dios (Peru).

Finally, we ask that artisanal and Indigenous fishers be actively included in strategies to combat mercury use and the degradation of aquatic ecosystems.

As the fishing sector, we also make the following commitments:

- Promoting the responsible and healthy consumption of fish;
- Disseminating information through fish fairs and community spaces;
- Temporarily reducing the fishing of species with high mercury levels until those levels are within international standards;
- Improving food safety throughout the fish supply chain.

Illegal Fishing

Illegal and poaching fishing is on the rise throughout the Madeira Basin, with thousands of fishers operating outside regulations in various countries.

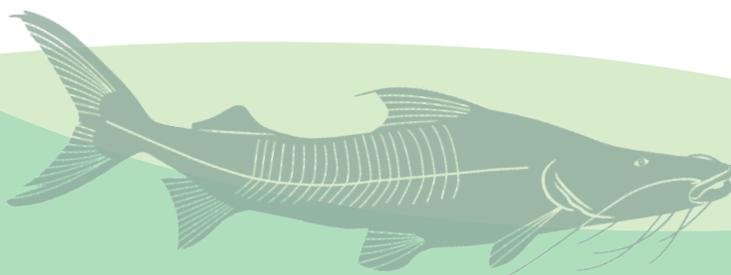
We urge governments to:

- combat illegal fishing in the basin;
- strengthen the enforcement of fisheries regulations;
- support those who practice legal and responsible fishing;
- regulate the use of harmful fishing gear.

As the fisheries sector, we also propose solutions that have already proven effective in several sub-basins.

Our main proposal is to promote local, regional, and transboundary fisheries agreements, as well as the participatory development of regulations for shared rivers, such as the Iténez/Guaporé and Abuná rivers. One of the priority transboundary fisheries agreements consists of approving and implementing a conservation plan for the gilded dorado catfish (*Brachyplatystoma rousseauxii*) in the Madeira River basin.

In recent years, we have made progress in community-based management of fisheries resources and in more inclusive forms of governance. However, we need greater institutional support to expand these initiatives and strengthen our organizations, including the formalization and recognition of fishing communities, associations, and federations.





Our Call

Amazonian migratory catfish travel up to 11 000 km during their life cycles, connecting the Andes with the Amazon and the Atlantic. Their survival depends on free-flowing rivers, healthy ecosystems, and coordinated management among countries.

The decisions made today will determine whether these species continue to be part of our rivers and our cultures, or whether they will disappear from the Madeira Basin.

Therefore, we call on the governments of Brazil, Bolivia, and Peru, as well as the CMS delegations gathered at COP15, to listen to the voices of those of us who depend on these rivers and work with us on real and urgent solutions.

The conservation of Amazonian migratory catfish is not just an environmental issue. It is also a matter of food security, social justice, and the future of our communities.

International efforts will only succeed if they go hand in hand with artisanal fishers, Indigenous peoples, and the communities that inhabit the Amazon.

Sincerely,

The fishers of the Madeira River basin