



## Comment and analysis

Expert views on the latest developments

**This month: Mark Carwardine** on the extinction of the Yangtze river dolphin

# “Conservation groups should be hanging their heads in shame”

It was the news I'd been expecting, but dreading, and it came in August. The Yangtze river dolphin has officially been declared extinct. One of the least known large mammals on Earth, it will go down in history as the first cetacean (whale, dolphin or porpoise) to be driven to extinction by human activity. I'm sure it won't be the last.

The Yangtze river dolphin had many different names: Chinese river dolphin, whiteflag dolphin, pei c'hi or baiji. It was a beautiful bluish-grey dolphin with a long, narrow, slightly upturned beak and a low triangular dorsal fin. It had tiny eyes – there was little need to see in the turbid waters of its riverine home – and relied on a sophisticated form of echolocation to hunt and find its way around. Found only in the world's third longest river, it was affectionately known as the 'Goddess of the Yangtze' by Chinese fishermen.

The dolphin's disappearance is not surprising, for two main reasons. Firstly, it couldn't have lived in a more unwelcoming place. The Yangtze river basin is home to an astonishing 10 per cent of the entire human population. With heavy boat traffic, agricultural run-off, industrial pollution, untreated sewage, riverbank development, dam construction and overfishing, the past 50 years have been a battle against the odds for its increasingly endangered wildlife – not just river dolphins but everything from alligators to paddlefish.

Secondly – and this is even worse – it was let down by indifference and incompetence. It could have been saved, but insufficient funding, poor project management and incessant bickering between the Chinese authorities and western scientists



The Yangtze dolphin – now sadly extinct

meant it didn't stand a chance. We had plenty of warning that it was in serious trouble, yet efforts to save it from extinction came far too little, too late.

The first time I went in search of the aquatic equivalent of the giant panda was in 1988, with Douglas Adams, author of *The Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, as part of a year spent travelling the world in search of endangered species for a project called *Last Chance to See*. In those days there were probably 100-200 Yangtze river dolphins surviving, and the alarm bells were ringing loud and clear.

### Talked to death

There was a conservation plan, first mooted in the mid-1980s and consistently advocated until the day the last dolphin died. The idea was to capture some of the survivors and establish an intensive breeding programme under semi-natural conditions. It could have worked. But it never happened. Instead, years were wasted in dispute about whether the

last survivors should be moved to a safer place or left in their natural home. The bickering, combined with an inexcusable lack of available funds (this project should have been an international conservation priority), lost the only real hope of saving the species from extinction.

I realise it's easy to point an accusatory finger after the event. But a surprising number of conservation groups were shouting about the plight of the world's most endangered cetacean, while doing little or nothing about it. Now they should be hanging their heads in shame.

The last search was an intensive six-week international expedition at the end of 2006. It was professional, thorough, well-intentioned and well-funded. The aim was to capture the last survivors and transfer them to a large oxbow lake, called Tian'ezhou, which would have been the perfect safe haven. But it was 20 years too late and, tragically, there were no survivors left to find.



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