



MARK CARWARDINE

WILD THOUGHTS

Has it gone or not? First the Yangtze river dolphin is declared extinct by the world's scientists, then a few days later someone in China claims to have filmed one alive and well. Experts questioned the validity of the distant, poor-quality video, but it was too late – the news had already broken. The non-scientific world breathed a collective sigh of relief in the mistaken belief that the Yangtze river dolphin had not disappeared after all.

But they missed the point. Of course, there may be a few survivors. But any hope of finding and capturing them for safe-keeping or protecting them in their rapidly deteriorating home in the Yangtze River has all but vanished. The scientists weren't crying wolf, whatever the video shows, because they are under no illusion that the dolphin is functionally extinct, even if it is not actually extinct.

Conservationists have struggled with exactly the same problem since the last known Tasmanian tiger died in Hobart Zoo in 1936. There have been hundreds of 'sightings' since then, most of which have been cases of mistaken identity or hoaxes. But the fact that no wild

individual has been confirmed since 1930 doesn't matter, because the sheer number of reports throws the official declaration of extinction into public doubt.

This is precisely why the tabloid press gets away with its summer ritual of great white shark sightings in British waters. Experts can't say, categorically, that great whites have never paid us a visit or might not in the future. So 'Jaws on our shores' headlines continue to sell newspapers, neatly filling the silly season with utter nonsense while Parliament is in recess, and nobody cares if the animals in those predictable photographs and videos are actually basking sharks or not.

With wildlife, there are few absolutes. An 'absence of evidence' on its own is not satisfactory 'evidence of absence'. For scientists, it's a question of never saying 'never' but also knowing when the chances are slim.



Gone? But not forgotten.

The Yangtze river dolphin is functionally extinct, even if it is not actually extinct.