



Yangtze Freshwater Dolphin Expedition 2006

## Last hope for the remaining baiji Yangtze dolphins

International science network searching for the world's rarest species of mammal

**Wuhan, 6 November 2006 –** The "Yangtze Freshwater Dolphin Expedition 2006" has been launched on Monday in the city of Wuhan in Central China. Led by the Wuhan Institute of Hydrobiology and the Swiss-based baiji.org Foundation, scientists from six nations in two research vessels will cover the 1,750 km from Wuhan to Shanghai to ascertain the population of the last remaining baiji freshwater dolphins and of the finless porpoises which are also endemic to the Yangtze. Scientists will also take samples of water and sediment from the entire course of the Yangtze in order to obtain a precise image of the water quality of baiji and Yangtze finless porpoise habitats.

This expedition is being led by the Ministry of Agriculture and also involves the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS) and institutes such as the Swiss Federal Institute of Aquatic Science and Technology (Eawag), the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the Hubbs SeaWorld Institute in the USA and the Fisheries Research Agency in Japan. The major project partners are SGS, Anheuser-Busch, SeaWorld and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC).

The baiji river dolphin is a prominent victim of the rapid growth of China's economy and is now the world's rarest mammal, with the current population living in the Yangtze in Central China, its native habitat, estimated to be less than 50. Continued destruction of the biotope, the fishing industry and collisions with vessels have brought the vulnerable dolphin to the verge of extinction. With a population of around 1000, the Yangtze finless porpoise is also on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.

The objective of the six-week expedition is to obtain reliable information about the baiji and Yangtze finless porpoise and their habitat. The information obtained during the expedition will enable Chinese decision-makers to plan a long-term programme for the conservation and protection of the Yangtze ecosystem and its inhabitants.

However, no one is certain where the last remaining baiji live. The most recent sightings were in 2004, when an adult baiji was seen in the Tongling Reserve in September, and an adult and juvenile baiji in July. A count in 1999 produced a total of 13 baijis.

The "Yangtze Freshwater Dolphin Expedition 2006" brings together leading dolphin and freshwater protection experts from all over the world. The scientists are travelling down the river from Wuhan to Shanghai and into the Chang Jiang Delta on two research vessels, using high-performance optical instruments to observe the surface of the water in order to determine the precise baiji and Yangtze finless porpoise population numbers. Experts from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the American Hubbs SeaWorld Institute and the Japanese Fisheries Research Agency will also use underwater microphones, to exploit every opportunity to locate the animals.

The scientists are not only ascertaining the stocks of baiji and Yangtze finless porpoise, but also acquiring data on the water quality of the Yangtze and on dolphin habitats. Experts from

**Pilot Yangtze freshwater Dolphin Expedition 2006**

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the Wuhan Institute for Hydrobiology and the Swiss-based Federal Institute of Aquatic Science and Technology (Eawag) are taking water and sediment samples from the entire course of the river between Wuhan and Shanghai to obtain a precise image of the water quality of baiji and Yangtze finless porpoise habitats.

In a context in which particularly heavily polluted stretches of the Yangtze can hardly provide suitable habitats for the Chinese river dolphin any longer, scientists are considering removing individual baiji from their ancestral territories and rehoming them in safety elsewhere. The Shishou reserve, a 20 km-long arm of the Yangtze, is the cetaceans' intended new home. It lies about 200 km west of the city of Wuhan, which has a population of seven million.

However, catching the river dolphins is anything but easy. Unlike land-dwelling mammals, cetaceans breathe voluntarily rather than automatically and cannot simply be anaesthetised. They would sink and drown. Nevertheless, experts from the World Conservation Union (IUCN) consider the transfer of individual river dolphins to Shishou a viable option.

To avert the imminent extinction of the vulnerable baiji, which is one of four species of exclusively freshwater-dwelling river dolphins (the others being those found in the Amazon, Ganges and Indus), the Swiss-based baiji.org foundation and the Wuhan Institute of Hydrobiology have coordinated international conservation efforts and simultaneously initiated a series of effective conservation projects.

The "Yangtze Freshwater Dolphin Expedition 2006" is being sponsored by a number of blue-chip companies. They include Anheuser-Busch, SeaWorld, the Swiss SGS. Other project partners include Canon, Fujinon, Garmin, Katadyn, KühneNagel, Pictet, Transa, Victorinox and Ziemann.

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