

Successful Pilot Yangtze Freshwater Dolphin Expedition

International scientists join forces to find the world's most critically endangered mammal

Wide-range Yangtze expedition scheduled for November 2006

In search of the last baiji freshwater dolphin: This November an international team of scientists from the Institute of Hydrobiology in Wuhan, the Swiss-based baiji.org foundation, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration NOAA (USA), and the Swiss EAWAG Water Research Institute will take to the Yangtze River in China in search of the baiji freshwater dolphin. The goal of the range-wide Yangtze Freshwater Dolphin Expedition 2006 is to evaluate the population and habitat of the last remaining baiji freshwater dolphin and the finless porpoise, also endemic to the Yangtze. With an estimated population of fewer than 100 individuals, the baiji river dolphin is the rarest mammal in the world.

Zurich, Wuhan, London, San Diego – 31 March 2006. In preparation for November's expedition, from 17 to 25 March 2006 a team of Chinese and international specialists staged a nine-day pilot expedition on the Yangtze near Wuhan to conduct various tests with the aim of developing a strategy to find the last of the world's baiji river dolphin. The Pilot Yangtze Freshwater Dolphin Expedition was launched to develop the most appropriate and sophisticated methodology for the November 2006 range-wide survey.

With the approval and support of the Wildlife Protection Office under the Ministry of Agriculture, the CAS Institute of Hydrobiology in Wuhan (IHB) joined forces with baiji.org foundation. The pilot was co-organized by the CAS Wuhan IHB and the baiji.org foundation. Also involved in the project were scientists from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration NOAA (USA) and the Swiss-based EAWAG Water Research Institute. The expedition was co-sponsored by Swiss watchmaker Swatch and pen-knife producer Victorinox.

The team spent nine days traveling up and down the Yangtze between the densely populated riverside cities of Wuhan and Yueyang, testing survey methodology, deploying acoustical monitoring equipment, and sampling river quality in an effort to optimize techniques for finding and assessing the habitat of the baiji and finless porpoise. They did not expect to see a baiji in such a short period of time, but were encouraged by the number of porpoises spotted during the expedition.

"This is the most challenging environment I've ever seen for a dolphin survey. It's like conducting a deer survey in the middle lane of a super-highway. You have an outside chance of finding a deer there, but it won't have a long future," said NOAA marine scientist Jay Barlow.

The results of this Pilot Yangtze Freshwater Dolphin Expedition will be used in a major forthcoming freshwater dolphin research expedition planned for November 2006. Traveling in two ships, the scientists will cover around 1,700 kilometers of the Yangtze River from the Three Gorges Dam to Shanghai, and provide the first accurate information on the number of baiji and finless porpoise left in the Yangtze and their last remaining habitats. Scientists and decisionmakers hope to use this data to develop a conservation strategy to pull the species

2006年长江淡水豚类考察
The Pilot Yangtze Freshwater Dolphin Expedition 2006



back from the brink of extinction and start work on a successful program to recover the Yangtze River ecosystem.

The baiji river dolphin is a prominent victim of China's rapid economic growth. It is now the rarest cetacean species in the world, with experts estimating the population of the freshwater cetacean – indigenous to the Yangtze river in central China – at fewer than 100 individuals. Ongoing destruction of the biotope, fishing, and collisions with ships have brought the delicate dolphin to the edge of extinction.

“The baiji dolphin is an important part of Chinese culture,” says Wang Ding, Deputy Director of the Chinese Wuhan Institute of Hydrobiology, and Director of the Expedition. “If the giant panda is China's symbol of the destruction of forests, the baiji Yangtze river dolphin stands for polluted rivers – but also for the way China has stepped up efforts to tackle its freshwater problems.”

Given that the more polluted and busy stretches of the Yangtze may no longer offer suitable habitats for the Chinese river dolphin, scientists can imagine removing individual baiji from the main channel to safer environments. The Shishou reserve, a 20-kilometer-long side arm of the Yangtze 160 kilometers to the west of Wuhan (a city with a human population of 7 million) has been earmarked as a potential conservation area.

Before such conservation action can be taken, scientists first need to know how many are left and where they live to be able to catch and move them to a safer habitat. 400 million human lives depend on the Yangtze's freshwater resources. Scientists fear that the loss of top predators like the baiji or finless porpoise is a warning sign that the ecosystem will soon not be able to support human life.

In an attempt to prevent the extinction of the delicate baiji – which alongside the Amazon, Ganges and Indus river dolphins is the fourth member of a family of dolphins that live exclusively in fresh water – the Swiss-based baiji.org foundation has joined forces with the Institute for Hydrobiology in Wuhan to coordinate international conservation efforts, and launch a series of efficient projects.

“By focusing our conservation efforts on managing the river for a flagship species like the Yangtze finless porpoise – which is the world's only freshwater porpoise – we hope to provide Chinese decisionmakers with an excellent starting point for a successful Yangtze recovery program.” said August Pfluger, CEO of the Swiss-based baiji.org Foundation.

The baiji.org foundation is a small network of specialists including scientists and freshwater conservation experts, staff at the Institute of Hydrobiology (IHB) in Wuhan, China, and project management and communications specialists.

The foundation unites know-how in research, conservation and consciousness-raising. Together with the IHB in Wuhan, the foundation promotes the conservation of Yangtze freshwater dolphins and the habitats in which they live – part of a greater mission to conserve the biodiversity of the entire Yangtze basin.

Pilot Yangtze freshwater Dolphin Expedition 2006

Co-organized by: Institute of Hydrobiology, The Chinese Academy of Sciences, Wuhan, Hubei, 430072, China, PR
Administrative Committee of Changjiang Fisheries Resource of the Ministry of Agriculture of China
Baiji.org Foundation, Klosbachstrasse 106, CH-8032, Zurich, Switzerland

2006年长江淡水豚类考察

The Pilot Yangtze Freshwater Dolphin Expedition 2006



baiji.org's first priority is to provide a platform for a new common strategic vision on the conservation of the baiji and the Yangtze finless porpoise. The foundation helps coordinate and assist fundraising efforts to support the planning, preparation and actual implementation of effective small-scale projects.

The baiji.org foundation also invites other organizations, authorities and committed business partners to join the platform. In particular it is seeking western companies with operations in China, where the freshwater issue is already right at the top of the agenda: "If companies operating in China fail to work with the authorities to make sure that economic development is compatible with the long-term needs of nature and the environment, sooner or later the boom is going to suffer massive setbacks," said August Pfluger.

At the end of 2004 the foundation initiated and co-organized and sponsored the Workshop on the Conservation of China's Baiji River Dolphin and Yangtze Finless Porpoise 2004, and marked a major step forward towards successfully networking global expertise with Chinese research institutes and government authorities in an effort to secure a sustainable future for China's baiji dolphin and Yangtze freshwater ecosystem.

A paper entitled the Report of the Workshop on Conservation of the Baiji and Yangtze Finless Porpoise, written by IUCN related experts and published by baiji.org foundation, summarizes relevant information on how to save the baiji and finless porpoise and better protect their habitat. The text is available in both English and Chinese. The publication of this report was made possible thanks to the support of the Federal Office for the Environment (FOEN), Switzerland.

For all media related enquires please contact:

baiji.org foundation
Klosbachstrasse 106
CH-8032 Zurich
Switzerland
+41 43 317 10 00
www.baiji.org
media@baiji.org

Pilot Yangtze freshwater Dolphin Expedition 2006

Co-organized by: Institute of Hydrobiology, The Chinese Academy of Sciences, Wuhan, Hubei, 430072, China, PR
Administrative Committee of Changjiang Fisheries Resource of the Ministry of Agriculture of China
Baiji.org Foundation, Klosbachstrasse 106, CH-8032, Zurich, Switzerland