

UN's International Decade for Action – Water for Life

Olympic medalist: Swim for asian river dolphins

On the eve of the UN World Day for Water, a team of swimmers, led by top triathlete and Olympic medalist Sven Riederer, staged BaijiSwim '05 to mark the start of the UN's International Decade for Action 2005-2015 – Water for Life. The aim of the swim is to show solidarity with endangered asian river dolphins and call for more effective conservation.

Zurich, March 22, 2005 – “This discomfort is a small price to pay to help conserve the baiji and its habitat,” said Sven Riederer as he plunged into the waters of Zurich's Limmat river, only five degrees Celsius above freezing point. Watched by Zurich's mayor Elmar Ledergerber and Wang Ding, director of the Institute for Hydrobiology in Wuhan, China, the 24-year-old top athlete and his twelve teammates braved the icy waters of the Limmat for three hours to draw attention to the importance of intact freshwater and river environments.

BaijiSwim '05 was not a race against the clock, but a swimming relay featuring twelve committed watersports fans from all over Switzerland, determined to demonstrate their solidarity with the baiji Yangtze river dolphin. For three hours, the swimmers swam in relay along a 350-meter stretch of the Limmat river in the heart of Zurich, starting and finishing at the Frauenbadi women's open-air baths. The event was officially sanctioned by the police, and a team of Zurich rescue swimmers were at hand to ensure the safety of those taking part.

During the swim, experts and representatives of the authorities and business community met for a “Déjeuner sur l'eau” to find out about and discuss issues related to animal and freshwater conservation in China.

BaijiSwim '05 was supported by Swiss watchmaker Swatch, and swimming and watersports equipment manufacturers Speedo and Quiksilver.

The aim of the event is to make a broad public, interested organizations and committed businesses aware of the importance of freshwater dolphins as a symbol of ecologically intact rivers and lakes – important habitats for many species, including humans.

Attending the event in Zurich, Wang Ding, a scientist and trustee of the baiji.org foundation, described the huge significance of the baiji: “If the great 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 in the run-up to the Olympics and the World Expo in Shanghai.”

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 destruction.



While a whole series of conservation measures have been introduced since the early 1990s, they have foundered or had little impact. Nowadays the Yangtze, whose catchment area is home to more than 350 million people, suffers extensive pollution, with concreted banks and contaminated fish.

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 and the US-based organization Conservation International to coordinate international conservation efforts, and launch a series of efficient projects.

The network 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 baiji.org foundation CEO August Pfluger on Monday.

To gather reliable population figures and data on the last remaining habitats of the baiji river dolphin, this fall the Institute for Hydrobiology in Wuhan, in collaboration with the baiji.org foundation and cetacean experts from the World Conservation Union (IUCN), will stage a major expedition to research the current situation.

In actual fact nobody knows exactly where the last baiji live. This year only three individuals have been sighted along a 1,500 kilometer stretch of river. The team of scientists and conservationists aboard the expedition’s two ships will travel around 2,000 kilometers down the Yangtze to conduct a reliable count of the baiji and gather data on water quality and potential baiji conservation areas.

Given that the more polluted stretches of the Yangtze may no longer offer suitable habitats for the Chinese river dolphin, scientists can imagine removing individual baiji from their indigenous habitats 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 conservation area.

This week the United Nations will launch its International Decade for Action – Water for Life. In the ten years from 2005 to 2015, various UN organizations will highlight the importance of water and the need to conserve this precious resource. In the next few years the baiji.org foundation will stage further BaijiSwim events on UN World Water Day. The BaijiSwim, which combines sporting endeavor with commitment to the environment, aims to draw attention to the importance of freshwater dolphins as a symbol of intact rivers and lakes – important habitats for many species including humans.

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