

Species At Risk

Baiji (*Lipotes vexillifer*)



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Endangered Species UPDATE
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Photo source: the Baiji.org Foundation.

An animal once revered in Chinese culture has become functionally extinct, according to reports from a recent expedition in China to monitor the baiji dolphin's population. Although the decline of the species was well documented—*National Geographic News* reported that the dolphins numbered in the low hundreds by the 1980's—scientists still held out hope of a sighting. Those hopes were dashed after a thorough search of the Yangtze River, the baiji's only known habitat, yielded no sign. The baiji was one of five freshwater dolphin species endemic to Asia. It is feared that the other four species, which are all critically endangered, might join the baiji in its undeserved fate.

With an upturned snout that seemed almost to smile and pearly skin, the baiji was once plentiful in the Yangtze, Asia's longest river. Efforts to save the baiji, which is reportedly the first cetacean species loss due to human involvement, were hampered by Chinese and Western disputes about the best way to preserve the species, according to The baiji.org Foundation. Only one baiji, Qi Qi, has ever survived in captivity for a significant period of time. He was held in a baiji reserve for 23 years until his death in 2002; there is currently no hope of breeding the animal for reintroduction into the wild.