

# Extinction of rare Chinese dolphin shows pollution of Yangtze River

BY ALDEMARO ROMERO  
SPECIAL TO THE SUN

**JONESBORO** — This past year ended with very bad news for the world's biodiversity — the Chinese river dolphin or baiji became extinct.

A 6-week expedition aimed at counting the last remaining individuals of this mammal throughout 1,000 miles of river turned up empty-handed.

As sad as the news is, it does not come as a surprise to most. The last count of these animals in 1997 had revealed only 13 animals left living in the Yangtze River, one of the world's most polluted and disturbed rivers. That waterway has been the subject of damming at great scale. To make things worse fishers in the Yangtze River use a fishing system called "rolling hooks" that kills almost any aquatic animal in sight.

Now another Chinese freshwater mammal, the finless porpoise or jiangzhu (river pig), also found in the Yangtze River, may become extinct. This species of freshwater dolphin has now fewer than 300 individuals left, down from 1,400 in 1991. No wonder many think that the question is not if this species will become extinct but when.

Marine mammals are very prone to becoming extinct because their low reproductive rate; they have very few progeny. Because of this, species of whales that were heavily exploited in the 19th and 20th centuries have yet

to recover to their original population levels.

The baiji is not the first marine mammal to become extinct in recent times. The Steller's Sea cow, a giant manatee-type animal that lived in the Pacific coasts of Russia, the Caribbean monk seal and the Japanese sea lion also became extinct in the last three centuries. However, the extinction of the baiji is the first one for a mammal in the last 50 years.

Other species of freshwater dolphins are found elsewhere in the world: the Amazon River dolphin, the Franciscana from Rio de la Plata in Argentina, and the Ganges River, Indus River and the irrawaddy dolphins (all from Asia) are the other species of dolphins found in rivers. They all suffer from the same threats as the baiji — pollution, damming, fishing and boat traffic.

In some countries the males of river dolphins are killed in order to extract their testicles which are used as meal aphrodisiacs. Not only are animal testicles not aphrodisiacs, but because most river dolphins

live in murky waters both males and females are killed the same.

In China the fast industrialization that has taken place in the last few decades and the lack of law enforcement has meant a lot of water pollution, boat traffic and indiscriminate kills of river dolphins.

Attempts to breed these animals in conditions of semi-captivity have not fared well. The last baiji in captivity died in 2002, and only one pregnancy occurred among captive finless porpoises in 2006.

As these animals become extinct, the only chance to study them is like the one ASU students have to examine these species from lab material at the ASU teaching and research mammal collection.

For more information contact the ASU Department of Biological Sciences at [biology@astate.edu](mailto:biology@astate.edu).

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Arkansas State University students of the Marine Mammals Lab class examine skulls of river dolphins on the Jonesboro campus. The skulls are used for teaching marine mammal

classes. Those on hand included (from left) Maria Isabel Fernandez, Kristin Hopkins, Michel Conner, Keisha Gray, Tracy Klotz and Kellie Freeman-Nelson.