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- Jerry George — Saturday, December 30, 2006



Baiji.org

Feeling guilty over Chinese dolphins' demise / Yangtze baiji extinct after surviving for 20 million years

The baiji, or Yangtze River dolphin, has been declared extinct by Chinese and Swiss scientists. Photo courtesy of www.baiji.org via The New York Times

I'm feeling a bit empty.

The experts who have been following the fate of fewer than a dozen freshwater dolphins left in China's vast Yangtze River have declared them lost and the species extinct. Decades of searching the river's murky waters must pass before the sad news becomes official, but the Chinese and Swiss scientists who have been keeping their vigil over the nearly sightless, elusive dolphins are sadly certain.

After surviving 20 million years of shifting climates, which included ice ages and periods far warmer than today, the baiji (a Chinese name meaning "gray-white dolphin") is gone from the face of the earth.

No matter which story you accept about how people populated the Middle Kingdom, the Yangtze dolphin was there first, patrolling the river in family groups of fewer than a half dozen and snatching fish in its long, very toothy beak. Scientists say that even then, the river was seriously silted at some times of year, as the Amazon and the Nile are, and the dolphins found their prey more by echo location than sight.

The dolphins, while more numerous than in recent years, were probably never common. Ranging upwards of 7 feet and weighing nearly a half ton, a female gave birth to a single 3-foot calf, at most, every other year.

That's not the kind of birthrate that leads to high population numbers.

In spite of the Yangtze River's importance to maritime commerce, the Yangtze dolphin remained unknown to science until 80 years ago. There are records of them being sighted from the mouth of the Yangtze, near Shanghai, all the way upriver to the mountains above where the grand Three Gorges Dam was recently built, but they were never extensively studied.

Baiji favored slow-moving channels and lakes, and they were most often seen where smaller tributaries entered the main Yangtze. Most of what is known of Yangtze dolphin life is based on limited observations frustrated by their rarity during the short time they've been known to science.

In 1975, the Chinese government declared the dolphin a national treasure and tried to set up sanctuaries and captive breeding programs. But the only populations to survive were in the wild.

Conservation officials thought the dolphins had turned a corner in 1986, when dolphin calves were seen for the first time in many years, but it was too little, too late. Boat traffic on the Yangtze continued to increase, the fish populations declined and so did the dolphin's population.

Extinction is final.

Extinction is also the way of the world. Nothing lasts forever. So why does the passing of a dolphin matter?

I reckon guilt is part of the answer. Species guilt. We're good at it. Few of us may have personally participated in the human development along the Yangtze, but it was fellow humans who polluted the river, fished it out and zipped about in boats driven by dolphin-injuring propellers. That's all the reason we need for thinking we did it.

There's also the cuteness factor. We humans have totemically adopted whales and dolphins as spiritual brothers and sisters, and their recovery from the decimation visited on them by commercial whaling somehow gives us hope.

Losing a spiritual cousin like baiji feels personal. Maybe the environmental optimism seen in whale recovery isn't quite what we thought.

We'll probably hear stories about how baiji was a top predator, and that losing a top predator like that can fundamentally disturb the Yangtze's ecosystem. And the stories are true.

Losing a top predator like the wolf from the Yellowstone ecosystem caused elk numbers to soar and the hungry elk munched every willow in sight. Everything's connected.

But last summer, I took a boat ride down the coast. There was a lot of bait in the water. Where there are small fish, there are bigger fish and birds feeding on them.

There were brown pelicans everywhere we looked. Brown pelicans were once nearly as rare along California's coast as the Yangtze dolphins were in China 10 years ago, but since we quit using eggshell-thinning DDT, pelican populations have recovered. For hour after hour on that trip we watched the pelicans make their seemingly clumsy dives and raise their heads back out of the water with fish in their pouches. We got to know the brown pelican as we watched.

We, none of us, will ever have that opportunity with baiji.

Freelance writer "Digger" Jerry George sends his journal "letters" home to the Bay Area from Yellowstone National Park -- or wherever he happens to be observing nature. E-mail him at home@sfchronicle.com.

Page F - 6

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