

The Chinese paddlefish is declared extinct



"It was one of the world's largest freshwater fish species."

Length: up to 7 meters

"It was one of the few ancient fish surviving from the Mesozoic Cretaceous period."

- 1989 • Listed as first-class state-protected animal in China
- 1996 • Declared "critically endangered" by International Union for Conservation of Nature
- 2009 • Last spotted in the wild
- 2022 • Officially declared extinct

Status of Freshwater Fish Biodiversity in the Yangtze River

● Possibly extinct ● Extinct in the wild ● Critically endangered

Baiji (Chinese river dolphin)



Fossils dating back 16 million years
Last spotted in 2004

Chinese sturgeon



Fossils dating back 145 million years
"Giant pandas in the water"

Yangtze alligator



Evolved around 40 million years ago
Wild population: 130 to 150

Chinese giant salamander



A "living fossil" dating back 170 million years
Wild population: around 100,000

Yangtze finless porpoise



Diverged from Baiji about 20.84 million years ago
Wild population: around 1,000

Source: The International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN)

A SAD FAREWELL:

They survived dinosaurs but were no match for modern society

Lu Feiran

Wei Qiwei, an aquatic life scientist, said he was saddened but not surprised that the Chinese paddlefish has been officially declared extinct.

In fact, the Yangtze River Fisheries Research Institution researcher came to the same death-knell conclusion in a paper published in 2019, three years before the official announcement from the International Union for Conservation of Nature.

At the time, Wei hypothesized that the fish had become extinct sometime between 2005 and 2010, based on decades of study.

"The last wild Chinese paddlefish we spotted was in 2003," he said. "It was over 3 meters long, and we estimated it was in its 20s — middle age for the species. Yet we never found any other individual since then."

He added: "Now 20 years later, that last paddlefish might have gone as well. When the last individual dies, the species is considered extinct."

The real question for Wei is: What's next?

Aquatic and amphibian and even reptile life, especially mid-to-large-size species, is under threat in the Yangtze River. Dabry's sturgeon, or the Yangtze sturgeon, has already been listed as extinct by the international conservation union. Baiji, or Yangtze white-fin porpoise, is deemed "possibly extinct" in the wild, with its population relying entirely on artificial reproduction. The Yangtze finless porpoise, Yangtze alligators and Chinese giant salamanders are considered critically endangered.

Although they belong to different classes, these species have much in common. They lived in the Yangtze for tens of millions of years before the effects of human activities in recent decades led them to breeding difficulties that decimated their populations.

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We wanted to track it and find its spawning ground, but we eventually lost contact with it. We tried to find it for the next decade, but the effort was in vain. Our hope became the last goodbye.

Wei Qiwei
Aquatic life scientist

The Chinese paddlefish was one of the largest and oldest freshwater fish in the world. Its origins could be traced back to Early Cretaceous, some 120 million years ago. It outlived dinosaurs but couldn't survive modern society.

Wei began studying the Chinese paddlefish in 1984, five years before it was listed as first-class protected animal in the country.

"Back then, dead bodies of the fish were spotted from time to time in Yichang and Jingzhou in Hubei Province," Wei said. "Some were caught by fishermen; some were killed by ship propellers."

According to Wei, the extinction of the paddlefish was caused by overfishing, river shipping and dam building. The same factors threaten other aquatic species.

"The Chinese paddlefish is an example of fish that externally fertilize," Wei explained. "The fertilization needed a spawning ground with suitable water flow speed and temperature. The larvae