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Some Progress Made on Conservation of the Yangtze Finless

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Some Progress Made on Conservation of the Yangtze Finless

Porpoise Since 2014

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1. The central government paid more attention to the conservation of the Yangtze Finless Porpoise

The Yangtze River basin has the highest-density human population in China. Approximately 40% of the population in China, which accounts for about 10% of the world's human population, lives in the basin region. The Yangtze River is well known as "Golden Channel", which is the most important logistic channel to China. A survey of the region between Yichang and Shanghai in 2006 counted a minimum of 19830 large shipping vessels, indicating that there was more than one ship within a one-hundred-meter river segment. The heavy shipping traffics have been considered as a great threat to the porpoises, yet traffic is continually increasing.

In 2012, the State Council released a national strategy "Yangtze River Economic Zones". The key aim of this strategy is to improve the shipping ability of the Yangtze River and to ensure the transferring of cargo ships from the sea to inland ports. This strategy led to an extensive debate between economists and environmentalists. Scientists and the environmentalists argued to halt this strategy or instead, to apply thorough environmental assessments of these channel regulation projects. However, regardless of these claims, a number of projects have taken place in the middle and lower reaches of the Yangtze River during the last three years, resulting in further negative environmental impacts to the Yangtze River.

There have been positive changes in 2014 though, when China's Ministry of Environment (MOE) rejected two channel regulation projects, which were to be located in the Zhenjiang provincial cetacean reserve and in the Anqing municipal cetacean reserve. MOE's comments on these two regulation projects' environmental assessment reports were the same: the projects will have harmful impacts on the survival of the Yangtze finless porpoise, and the Environmental Impact Assessment of the projects did not fully address the impacts on Yangtze finless porpoise and the proposed mitigation measures were not effective enough. This can be viewed as the first victory of conservation-based scientists and environmentalists.

Now the central government pays more attention to the conservation of the Yangtze River as well as the Yangtze finless porpoise. It gives us hope to continue efforts to protect the Yangtze finless porpoise.

2. China's Ministry of Agriculture implements first class protection of Yangtze's finless porpoise

China's Ministry of Agriculture (MOA), the main administrative department responsible for the conservation of the Yangtze finless porpoise, together with the State Forestry Administration (SFA), are the national bodies to jointly develop and update the *National Key Protected Wild Animal List of 1989*, according to the *Wild Animal Protection Law of People's Republic of China*. MOA and SFA respectively decide the list of endangered aquatic wildlife and terrestrial wildlife; and the Yangtze finless porpoise was listed as second grade protected animal in the list when it was released back in 1989.

Good news came with the *Notice on Further Strengthening the Protection and Management of Yangtze Finless Porpoise*, issued by MOA on 14th Oct. 2014, stipulating that Yangtze finless porpoises is now required to be protected and managed according to the standards of National First Grade Key Protected Wild Animals.

This is a major breakthrough for upgrading the protection level of the finless porpoise, which experts of IHB (Institute of Hydrobiology of the Chinese Academy of Sciences) and NGOs such as WWF have been pursuing and advocating for decades. MOA's recognition of upgrading the finless porpoise's protection level now brings new hopes to the future of this endangered species.

According to the MOA's document, actions such as illegal fishing and intentionally harming finless porpoises will be prosecuted for criminal responsibility. No organization or individual will be allowed to illegally occupy finless porpoise's habitat, feeding area, and migration channels. Actions damaging the living environment of the porpoises are completely prohibited, otherwise compulsory restoration will be required and a fine will be issued. Serious cases will be investigated for criminal responsibility.

MOA's notice ensures that Yangtze finless porpoise will be treated as a First Grade Protected animal within their jurisdiction. This has at least three positive meanings. Firstly, within Nature Reserves, Yangtze finless porpoise will be protected according to the requirements of First Grade Protected Animals. Meanwhile, threats such as construction of water conservancy projects, shipping and dredging, will be strictly managed and potential perverse impacts are likely to be reduced. Secondly, illegal fishing will be effectively deterred in the middle and lower Yangtze River, which largely benefits the porpoises. Thirdly, MOA is likely to increase investments in the finless porpoise's protection.

3. MOA is planning to transform the conservation programme to conservation projects

MOA releases the Action Plan of the Conservation of the Yangtze Finless Porpoise (APCYFP) every 10 years. The APCYFP is a national programme intending to guide conservation actions. Although the first APCYFP had been released in 2001, many conservation initiatives were not implemented due to a lack of government support and insufficient funding. The population of Yangtze finless porpoise has been declining sharply during the past 10 years.

In 2012, the IHB finished drafting the second APCYFP for MOA for the following cycle. MOA made a few positive changes to the drafted document, in which it planned to transform APCYFP from a national programme to national projects. This means all the conservation managements listed on the APCYFP will receive both policy guarantee and funding from the central government. We believe this will largely improve the current situation of the conservation on the Yangtze finless porpoise.

4. Sand mining is controlled in some extent in Poyang Lake

Sand mining causes direct damage to the porpoise's habitat; and it also has indirect impacts to this species by destroying fish spawning grounds with a consequent of fish resource decline. The fish resource decline is considered as one of the main factors leading to the population decline and threatening survival of the Yangtze finless porpoise. Sand mining in river channels or in lakes in many cases can be the focus of conflicts between aquatic environment conservation and economic development.

In recent years, with accelerating economic development and urban construction, river channel sand mining expanded rapidly. This phenomenon has become increasingly serious in the Poyang Lake, Jiangxi province. The widespread sand mining was one of the main threats to the Yangtze finless porpoise in the Poyang Lake.

In January 2012, in order to protect the aquatic environment of the Poyang Lake and to protect the Yangtze finless porpoise, the provincial government revised the measures of river channel sand mining management in Jiangxi province. Among those revised measures, a few involved ecological protection requirements and sustainable utilization of resources, such as (1) reestablishing the sand mining area to avoid biodiversity hot spots, (2) setting limits to the total output of annual sand mining, and (3) limiting the number and tonnage of sand mining boats.

Since then, the annual sand harvest has been declining every year. The annual harvest of 2015 is planned to be 34-40% less than that in 2014. The sand mining boats were declined from more than 100 in 2009 to 57 in 2014. We hope a similar policy could be implemented to the Dongting Lake as soon as possible.

5. Local NGOs start to play an important role in protection actions

The threats from illegal fishing to Yangtze finless porpoise in Dongting Lake have been significantly mitigated. The survey conducted by IHB, local fishery agency and WWF, showed that the porpoise encounter rate was higher in Jan. 2015 than that in Jan. 2012.

The illegal fishing activities in Dongting Lake have decreased significantly thanks to the joint efforts of local NGOs. For example, Yueyang Association of Conserving Yangtze Finless Porpoise, with help from WWF and IHB, conducted daily patrols. These efforts make local fishermen change to use less- or non-harmful fishing practices.

The survey conducted by Yueyang Fishery Management Station found that the proportion of illegal fishing activities has fallen significantly, from 58% (before 2012) to 19% (2014). The monitoring data by IHB from 2012 to 2014 showed that the fishery resources in Dongting Lake tend to be slowly restoring.

The local NGO of Yueyang Association of Conserving Yangtze Finless Porpoise plays a key role in the improvement of the fishery of the Dongting Lake. Now there are almost 20 local NGOs located in the middle and lower reaches of the Yangtze River, such as the Yangtze finless Porpoise Bay in Hubei province, Smiling Angel in Shanghai. These NGOs act similar to the Yueyang Association of Conserving Yangtze Finless Porpoise. Their efforts successfully arouse public passions and attentions to the Yangtze finless porpoise conservation.

6. One *in situ* reserve and one *ex situ* reserve were established in 2014 and 2015

Conservation actions including both *in situ* and *ex situ* conservation measures are implemented to save the Yangtze finless porpoise. To date, the actions implemented include the enactment of seven *in situ* reserves and one *ex situ* reserve. Those *in situ* reserves physically provide protection over 29% of the porpoise's habitat. The actual effectiveness of these reserves, however, is suspicious, and is likely to be low due to insufficient resources, lack support of governmental bodies, and poor coverage of high-density areas. To enhance the effectiveness of *in situ* measures, actions such as increasing the size of existing reserves and establishing new reserves in unprotected hotspots should be considered immediately.

In October 2014, the Nanjing Yangtze Finless Porpoise Provincial Reserve was established by the local government, with help from IHB. This was the eighth *in situ* reserve, which covers almost 50km mainstream of the Yangtze River.

The sole *ex situ* reserve located at the Tian-E-Zhou oxbow, which is thus far the only successful one for a cetacean species in the world. The number of inhabiting porpoises within the reserve has been continuously increasing since 1990 when the first group of the Yangtze finless porpoise was introduced. Recent life-table analysis on the Tian-E-Zhou population reveals an increasing trend, showing an over 5% increase in abundance per annum. The *ex situ* method has been proved to be efficient. Since the current porpoise population decline cannot be reversed or mitigated in the near future, there is an increasing focus on the implementation and enhancement of *ex situ* measures.

After two years investigation, the second *ex situ* reserve was established in the He-Wang-Miao oxbow in 2015. This new reserve is 33km long with the coverage of 46.7km², which is two times larger than the Tian-E-Zhou reserve.

In March 2015, eight Yangtze finless porpoises were captured in Poyang Lake, four of them were introduced into the He-Wang-Miao reserve, and another four introduced into the Tian-E-Zhou reserve.