

# Delay, confusion and neglect

David Tickner considers the extinction of the Yangtze River dolphin



Samuel Turvey is not the first westerner to write about the decline of the *baiji*, or Yangtze River dolphin (*Lipotes vexillifer*). However, he goes into considerably more depth than other authors, bringing us up to date on the species' demise. It is a cautionary tale of delay, confusion and neglect culminating in the (almost certain) first extinction of a cetacean species caused by humans.

## Anger and frustration

The book is eminently readable. Turvey is a *bona fide* scientist who is also an eloquent communicator. Where he gets into technical detail, as in his description of reduced genetic diversity and its effects on a species' chance of survival, he keeps it brief. His description of the final survey for the *baiji* in 2006 is colourful and poignant and brought back vivid memories of my own visits to the Yangtze.

The tone of the story is also right, matching the mood Turvey describes at one particular setback: 'I don't know whether [it] made me more appalled or incensed.' In this sense, the book is a companion piece to Arundhati Roy's polemic about the Narmada River Project, *The Greater Common Good*.<sup>1</sup> After reading each, I shared the authors' feelings of anger and frustration.

Few of the main players come out well. With notable exceptions the Chinese are portrayed as indolent, uncaring and self-serving. Donors and the media are shallow, incompetent and myopic.

## Conservation criticisms

Turvey's strongest criticisms are reserved for the international conservation movement. The evidence suggests that he has a point. The *baiji* is, in all likelihood, gone, so clearly we failed to save this particular 'whale' (well, cetacean). Nevertheless, his view of the shortcomings of the major non-governmental organisations only partly resonated.

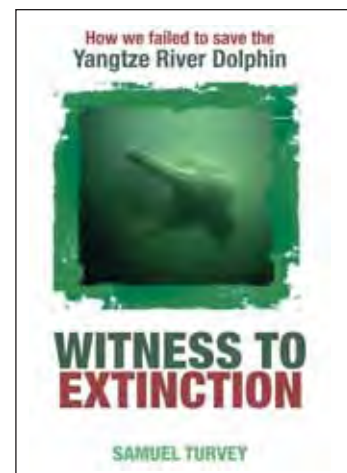
For instance, he rages against the 'triage' model of conservation: prioritising scarce resources so as to help species that are in significant trouble but which still have a reasonable chance of survival, at the expense of those for which the chances are slim. But he suggests no alternative. Does he believe that we should simply work on every single endangered species everywhere?

Even if this is realistic (and it isn't), how could it possibly help to address his other major complaint, that decision-making in the conservation movement is too slow? Turvey is reluctant to acknowledge that, as well as disaster emergency conservation projects, there is a place for longer-term activities that seek to address root causes of biodiversity loss and so help to avoid many more *baiji*-style emergencies in the future.

He may have a point about 'fear of failure' in the conservation movement. But far from being, as he cynically suggests, the easy way out of risky conservation projects, prioritising allocation of resources to maximise overall conservation impact for decades to come is necessary and difficult. As this book demonstrates, it is also often unpopular.

## Wider picture

Towards the end of his account, Turvey broadens the horizon a little and warns of other species, including the Indus and Ganges river dolphins, which might be heading for the same fate as the *baiji*. This is the real value of the book: offering the *baiji* as a canary in the conservation coal mine. But he might have made more of this.



Samuel Turvey (2008). *Witness to Extinction: How we failed to save the Yangtze River Dolphin*: OUP

The decline in freshwater biodiversity is steeper than in any other habitat type. The consequences for society can be dire. Fred Pearce's *When the Rivers Run Dry* paints this broader picture much more effectively.<sup>2</sup>

In the cover notes to the book, Mark Carwardine describes it as 'thought provoking'. This is an understatement. I will be buying copies for my colleagues in WWF and I will recommend that they read it alongside Pearce's book.

- 1 Arundhati Roy (1999) *The Greater Common Good*, Flamingo
- 2 Fred Pearce (2006) *When the Rivers Run Dry*, Beacon Press



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