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MEDIA RELEASE

River Dolphins – a future in doubt

The Chinese study which recently revealed the possible extinction of the Yangtze River Dolphin and the growing plight of the Finless Porpoise took centre stage on the first day of the 10th International Riversymposium & Environmental Flows Conference.

The 'River Dolphins' feature session held at the Brisbane Convention and Entertainment Centre provided insight into the threats facing the dwindling Finless Porpoise population and how the urbanisation of the world's rivers could contribute to the extinction of more species.

This session also discussed the conservation of the Mekong River Irrawaddy Dolphin which is currently under threat.

River dolphins are considered the 'watchdogs' of the water and the high levels of toxic pollutants which are often found accumulating in their bodies provide a stern warning of poor water quality and the fate of the river in which they live.

The session was presented by speakers Lifeng Li, Anna Forslund, Petr Obrdlik, Sandeep Kumar Behera and Uzman Khan.

Director of Freshwater Programme, World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) Lifeng Li said while the plight of the Yangtze River Dolphin was grim there was still hope for the Finless Porpoise.

"There has been unconfirmed sightings of the Yangtze River Dolphin however at this point our study has indicated that it is highly likely to be extinct," he said.

"Numbers have plummeted over the years, in fact in 1980 the numbers were already low at 400 Yangtze River Dolphins to 100 in the late 1990's which can be attributed to the traffic congestion on the river, pollution and the increase in environmental degradation."

The Yangtze River is China's longest river and the third largest in the world and is referred to as the country's Golden Channel due to the level of transport and lives that depend on it.

River Dolphins are now some of the world's most endangered cetaceans and live in both fresh water and saltwater estuaries and rivers.

Due to habitat loss, hunting by humans and naturally low numbers, they are extremely vulnerable to extinction with the Yangtze River Dolphin becoming the first large vertebrate to be declared extinct in more than 50 years.

WWF Freshwater Officer Anna Forslund said despite this, there was still a chance for some of the world's River Dolphins as long as people acted quickly.

"Now is time for being proactive and if we want to save the Mekong River Dolphin which is already under threat due to the same reasons that has possibly wiped out the Yangtze River Dolphin," she said.

"The Mekong River is the heart and soul of mainland South-East Asia and runs 4,800 kilometers from its headwaters on the Tibetan Plateau through Yunnan Province of China, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Lao PDR and Vietnam.



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International Riversymposium is part of Riverfestival, an initiative of Brisbane City Council and the Queensland Government.

“Over 60 million people depend on the Mekong and its tributaries for food, water, transport and many other aspects of their daily lives so if the Mekong River Dolphin follows the same fate as the Yangtze River Dolphin we will be facing an even more serious problem.”

The 10th International Riversymposium & Environmental Flows Conference takes place in Brisbane from Monday 3 to Thursday 6 September 2007 and is part of *Riverfestival* – a 10-day annual celebration of Brisbane’s iconic river, its people, art, culture and environment from 31 August to 9 September, 2007.

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