

## CETACEAN SPECIALIST GROUP



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Minister Changfu HAN, Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, No.11 Nongzhanguan Nanli, Chaoyang District, Beijing China (postcode: 100125)

Dear Minister Han:

As I am sure you know, since 2013 the Yangtze River subspecies of narrow-ridged finless porpoise has been red-listed by IUCN as Critically Endangered (<http://dx.doi.org/10.2305/IUCN.UK.2013-1.RLTS.T43205774A45893487.en>). Your government is to be commended for its 10-year 'rescue action plan' to save this, the world's only freshwater porpoise population. At the same time, we are concerned that some recent decisions could nullify and reverse some of the important progress that has been made toward conserving this endemic Chinese subspecies.

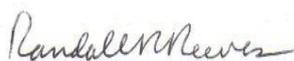
By the end of 2015, the porpoise population in the semi-natural reserve at Tian-E-Zhou oxbow had increased rapidly and numbered more than 60 individuals. Scientists were hopeful that improved management would allow the reserve's fish resources to increase and the porpoise population to maintain its positive trajectory. The new, larger reserve in nearby He-Wang-Miao oxbow was being developed and stocked at least partly by animals from Tian-E-Zhou. The report of the 2018 meeting of the Sub-committee on Small Cetaceans of the International Whaling Commission (of which China is a full member) listed as one of the measures needed for a 'sustained recovery' of the Yangtze finless porpoises, "Strengthening the *ex situ* conservation management programs and moving towards releasing animals from the semi-natural reserves into the Yangtze River and adjoining lakes as part of a step-wise restocking plan."

Against that background, we were surprised and disappointed to learn that in late July of this year the Yangtze Fishery Administration Office of your Ministry had approved sending 14 porpoises, six from the Xijiang Finless Porpoise Reserve (currently stocked with about 20 animals, including some taken from the wild and some from Tian-E-Zhou) and eight directly from Tian-E-Zhou, to commercial display facilities at Chimelong and Haichang. There is no evidence to suggest that either of these facilities has the capability or commitment to carry out a captive breeding program.

Even if some of the porpoises brought into the commercial enclosures were to survive and reproduce, such a program has little potential to contribute to the ultimate goal of enhancing the wild population in the Yangtze River and its lakes. In contrast, the steadily growing network of semi-natural reserves appears to be a promising approach with real potential, not only as a way to save Yangtze porpoises but also as a model for other countries to consider when trying to save endangered cetaceans. Removing animals from semi-natural reserves to supply commercial display facilities is bound to be counterproductive.

From the information available, this initiative does not appear to be consistent with the mandate of the Saving Yangtze Finless Porpoise Alliance announced by your Ministry in June 2017. Nor is it clear that such a program has the support of China's own internationally recognized finless porpoise experts. I strongly urge you to reconsider the approach and refrain from depleting the populations in reserves to supply commercial facilities.

Sincerely,



Randall Reeves