

Rarest Mammal

Now you see them, now you

White Horse of Yangtze

The river is teeming with baiji, a white dolphin which has a large belly and a long beak with sharp teeth." (Er Ya, 202 BC)

In ancient Chinese legends, baijis (白鱗) or 白鱗 are portrayed as galloping white horses

sightings of the animal are now so rare that scientists estimate that only about ten baijis exist in the wild. How did this happen? What had happened during the past 2000 years to cause baijis to die off?

The answer is human activities – humans are undoubtedly baijis' worst enemy. Despite current conservation efforts by Chinese scientists to protect the species, it is believed that baijis will become extinct soon. It is a sad fate for a gentle species that has dwelled in Asia's longest river for thousands of years.



Baiji Facts

Baijis are majestic creatures that grow to be as large as a man, and can weigh up to 200kg. Baijis are almost blind and navigate the Yangtze through echolocation – baijis make clicking noises that bounce back as echoes and that is used to determine the animals' surroundings. Baijis often collide with boats because the noise boats make interferes with echolocation.

that bear deities across the river. Known as the Goddess of Yangtze, baiji (*Lipotes vexillifer*) is actually a river dolphin found only in the Yangtze River of China. Remarkably, its existence was first recorded in the ancient encyclopaedia, Er Ya (尔雅), during the Han dynasty about 2000 years ago.

During the Han dynasty, the river teemed with baijis and there was no indication that the species was dying out. Unfortunately,

Humans – Nature's Greatest Enemy

Yangtze River is one of the most densely populated areas in the world. And it is heavily used and abused by humans – factories spew toxic waste into the water; fishermen use hazardous fishing methods that accidentally trap large animals like baijis; boat traffic pollute the river; motor boat propellers maim animals; river dams destroy habitats and force animals to seek out other habitats.

Pika-who?

Hikers exploring the alpine regions of North America have often reported sightings of a cute, furry animal that would pop up between the rocks to observe the hikers inquisitively. These lovable animals known as American pikas are related to rabbits and hares, and resemble overweight hamsters with round ears. They live under rocks in the mountains and are known for their curious behaviour. Pikas cut and collect

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wildflowers and herbs, then lay them out to dry in the Sun before carrying their harvest back home in preparation for snowy weather.

Pikas are extremely sensitive to temperature changes – just a few degrees warmer and they will go in search of cooler places in higher altitudes. This means that American pikas are extremely

susceptible to global warming. Scientists warn that these shy little creatures would soon die out if the weather continues to heat up.

Canada's Most Wanted

The rarest mammal in North America is the Vancouver Island marmot – a cuddly rodent that looks like a teddy bear. It is a strict



Deforestation

Deforestation is the clearing of land to make way for human settlements and to meet the demand for timber. It causes extinctions because it destroys the habitats of plants and animals. Deforestation also contributes to global warming because trees convert carbon dioxide, a greenhouse gas, into oxygen.

vegetarian and likes to feast on wildflowers and shrubs. These marmots live only on Vancouver Island, Canada, and are highly endangered.

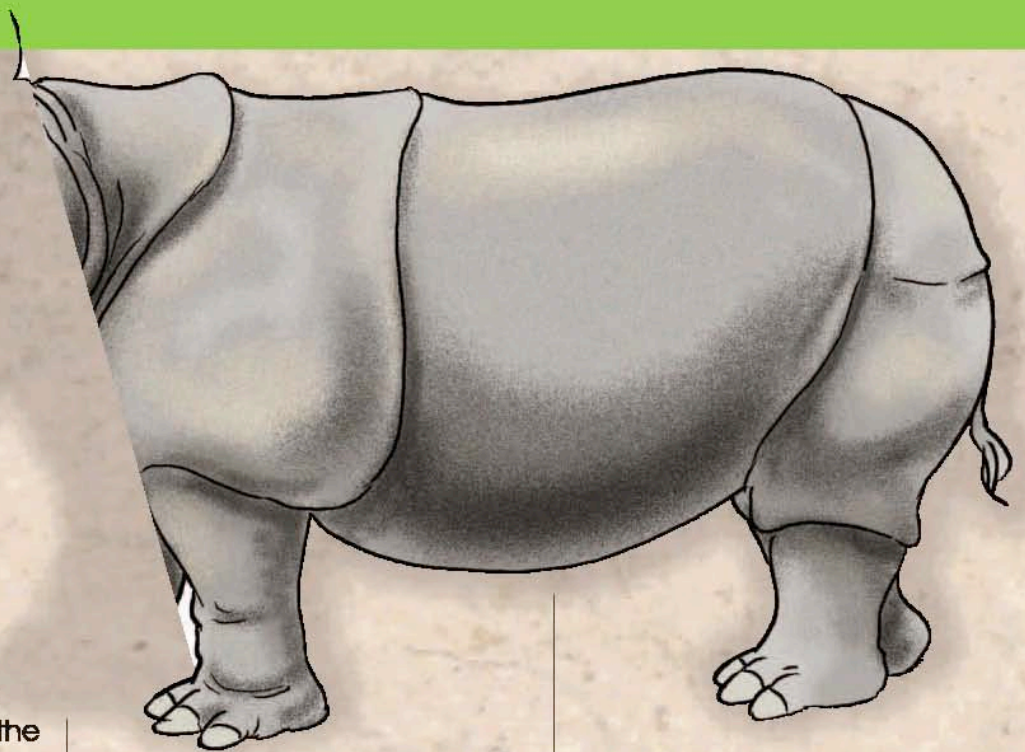
Sadly, the species is disappearing because humans have disrupted their habitats by clearing the land they live on. With only about a hundred individuals in the wild, the species looks poised to suffer the fate of the dodo – a bird that became extinct in 1681.



Global Warming

Industries, vehicles and other human activities produce large amounts of such as greenhouse gases carbon dioxide, methane and chlorofluorocarbons. These gases trap heat from the Sun in Earth's atmosphere and cause the temperature to rise. Global warming causes many species to die out and even creates powerful storms that kill thousands of people every year. One of the ways to stop global warming is to reduce the burning of fossil fuels for energy and switch to using renewable energy such as solar energy.

Mmm...
mud...



Rare Rhino

It isn't just shy, defenceless creatures that die out – even the seemingly indestructible rhinos face the possibility of extinction. The Javan rhino is the world's rarest rhinoceros and there are less than sixty of these animals living in Indonesia and Vietnam.

Weighing about 1500kg, this one-horned animal lives in tropical rainforests and enjoys wallowing in muddy swamps. If you think that's because they enjoy getting dirty, think again! These rhinos may look like they have thick skins, but they actually have sensitive, thin skins that need to be coated in mud to prevent sunburn and keep pesky insects away! So, next time you want to ward off mosquitoes, try using mud! But only if you don't mind warding off your friends too!

Nowadays, you won't see many Javan rhinos rolling around in mud, but in the 1700s, these rhinos were so abundant that they were considered pests by humans. Rhino horns and hides were also sought after for medicine and leather. Despite a ban on hunting rhinos now, the rhino population has been too drastically reduced to recover and extinction seems imminent.

Humans – The Cause of Extinctions

In the past, animal extinctions were frequently caused by natural disasters and major climate changes. But nowadays, human interference is the most likely reason that animals become extinct – over-hunting species for food, leather and fur; clearing of forest land; pollution of animal habitats and other environmentally-unfriendly activities all cause animals to die out.

What do you think can be done to prevent animals from suffering the same fate as the baiji, American pika, marmot and Javan rhino?

Steller's Sea Cow – A Cautionary Tale

Among the animals that have become extinct due to human activities, the Steller's sea cow stands out as one of the saddest examples.

In 1733, the world's largest scientific expedition was sent from Russia to explore uncharted territory in the North Pacific. Under

the command of the famed explorer, Vitus Bering, several new species of plants and animals were discovered and observed by the great naturalist, Georg Steller. Among the animals Dr. Steller discovered was the now extinct Steller's sea cow. The only species of the order Sirenia (which dugongs and manatees also belong to) that lived in cold waters. It looked like a cross between a whale and a sea lion. Sometimes, the animal was mistaken for an overturned boat, as it often drifted along languidly at the water surface, unwary of humans.

Unfortunately, this made the animal an easy target, and its supposedly delicious meat made it an even more attractive target to hunters. A full grown Steller's sea cow is said to have fed a crew of 33 sailors for a month! In 1768, less than three decades after its discovery, the entire species was wiped out.

Do you think hunting animals for food in this day and age is right? What about the hunting of large animals like whales?

Ahh...this is the life!



The Quagga Saga - Is extinction really forever?

What has a zebra's head and a horse's body? Answer: A quagga! Quaggas are slightly zany looking animals that used to roam the grasslands of South Africa in large numbers. Unfortunately for quaggas, they were considered too wild for domestication and were shot indiscriminately for their meat and hides, as well as to stop them from eating grass meant for reared sheep. As a result of this atrocity, quaggas were hunted to

extinction and the last quagga died in a zoo in 1883.

Why Quagga?

If you are wondering where the animal got its odd name, here's a clue: the animal was said to make "quahah" noises.

Gaga over Quaggas

But that's not the end of the quagga saga! In the early 1980s, DNA was extracted from preserved quagga hides. It was discovered that their DNA was very similar to the zebra's, making the quagga a sub-species of the

zebra! Scientists successfully cloned that bit of extinct DNA and soon, animals that resembled quaggas were born!

Although these animals may look like quaggas, do you think they are the same as the quaggas that became extinct? Scientists are split on this issue - some believe that no extinct animal can be brought back, no matter how selective the breeding process was, but others think that if it looks like a quagga, then it's a quagga! Talk about being in a quagmire!

Here is a list of other animals that are endangered. See if you can find out more about them on the Internet.

Endangered Mammals

- ✓ Seychelles sheath-tailed bat
- ✓ Hiriola
- ✓ Vaquita
- ✓ Iberian lynx
- ✓ Riverine rabbit
- ✓ Saola
- ✓ Tonkin snub-nosed monkey
- ✓ Addax
- ✓ Arabian oryx
- ✓ Golden-rumped lion tamarin
- ✓ Dwarf blue sheep
- ✓ Southern muriqui

