Dear Minister Han,

I am writing to express concern about recent removals of Critically Endangered Yangtze River finless porpoises for public display. China has made an important contribution to conservation by establishing its network of semi-natural reserves for Yangtze porpoises, the world’s only freshwater population of a porpoise species. However, the numbers of these porpoises in the main river and the two lakes (Dongting and Poyang) have continued to decline. The populations in the semi-natural reserves provide some insurance for subspecies survival, but equally important, they offer hope for enhancing the wild population. In fact, this was the main reason for establishing the reserves in the first place – to provide porpoises to repopulate the Yangtze and its lakes as conditions in their natural habitat improve. Given this, the rationale behind plans to remove porpoises from the reserves to supply commercial public display facilities, apparently without any evaluation of the conservation implications, is unclear and appears contrary to the strong conservation approach taken by China for this species. We concur with the concerns expressed by the IUCN Cetacean Specialist Group that if these plans go ahead, much of the progress made to date under the Saving Yangtze Finless Porpoise Alliance announced by your ministry could be nullified and reversed.

The Society for Marine Mammalogy is the world’s largest professional group dedicated to the study of marine mammals, which includes freshwater dolphins and porpoises. We have a membership of approximately 2,000 scientists from more than 25 countries, including a strong representation from China. Our goal is to facilitate the understanding and conservation of marine mammals and the ecosystems that support them. We strongly urge that you reconsider authorizing the use of animals from the semi-natural reserves to stock public display facilities. Removals of animals from the reserves for such purposes has the effect of depleting the ex situ populations, making additional captures of wild porpoises to restock the reserves unnecessary.
more likely. As such, this would tend to defeat the primary purpose of the reserves, which is to enhance, rather than increase removals from, the wild population of Yangtze finless porpoises.

Thank you for considering our Society’s concerns on this important matter.

Sincerely,

D. Ann Pabst
President