

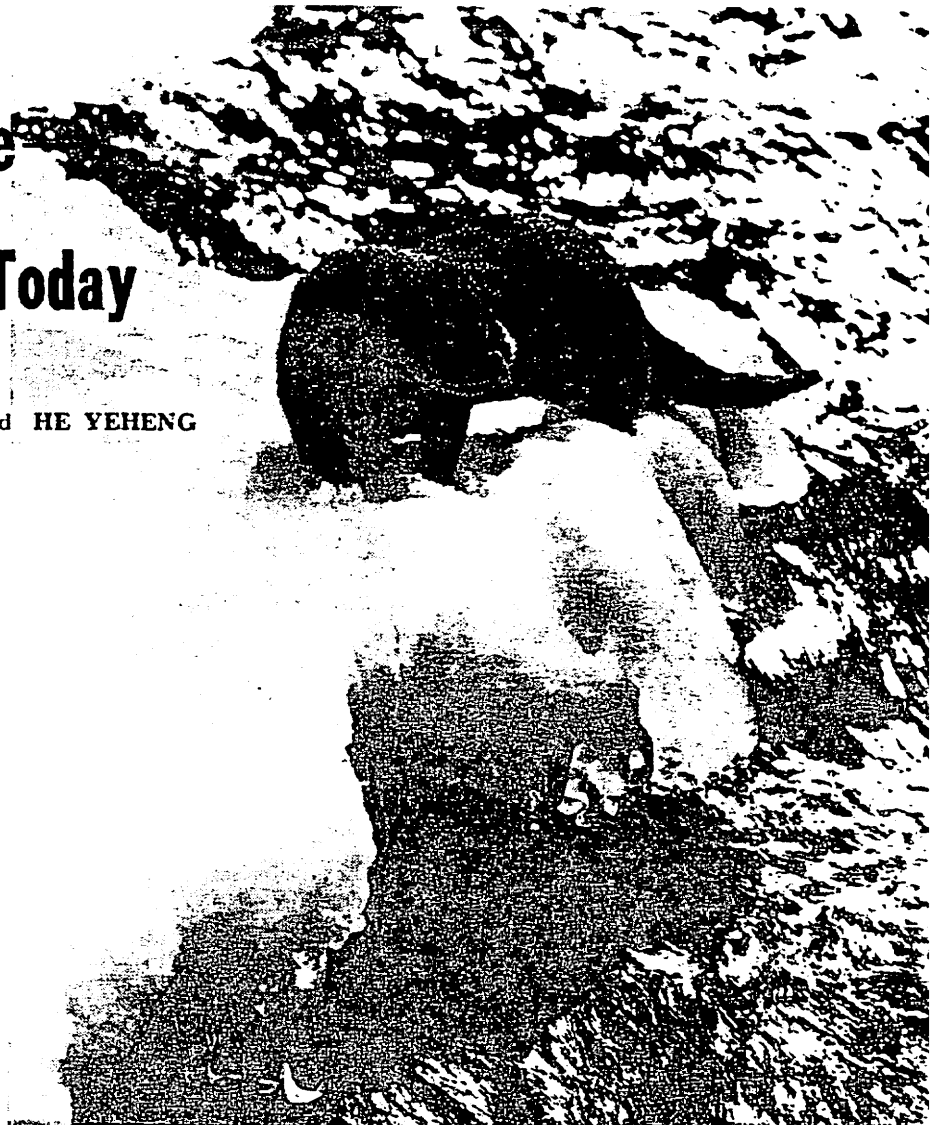
China's Wildlife Yesterday and Today

WEN HUANRAN and HE YEHENG

WITH only 6.5 percent of the world's land area, China is the home of between 12 and 14 percent of the world's wildlife species, some of them rare and extremely valuable.

Examples are the black gibbons on Hainan Island, one of six such species in the world; the savage South China tiger in the Nanling Mountains; the Yangtze alligator, found exclusively along the Changjiang River; and the Northeast China tiger and sika deer in the virgin forests of the Changbai Mountains. Moose weighing 500 kg. but able to run across

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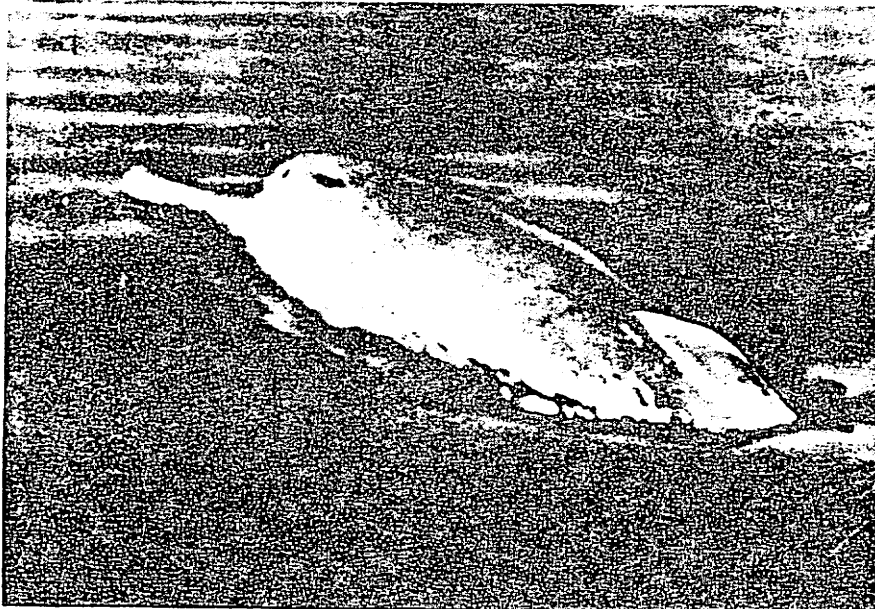


Otter in the Changbai Mountains.

Liang Qi

Dolphin in the Changjiang (Yangtze) River.

Li Yifang



marshland and swim rivers, inhabit the Greater Hinggan and Lesser Hinggan ranges. In southwestern and western China there are the wild elephants, peacocks, yaks and other highland animals as well as the world-famous giant panda. In the arid northwest dwell such rare animals as the wild ass and wild horse.

Changes in Habitat

The distribution of China's rare wildlife has undergone enormous changes over the centuries. Its history is a fascinating subject for investigators.

Between 1,000,000 and 100,000 years ago the giant panda roamed broad sections of the Changjiang River basin and provinces south of it. Small pockets of them were also to be found to the north in



Barn owl (monkey-faced hawk) from the Wuyi Mountains Nature Preserve.
Li Kaiyuan



Marten in the Changbai Mountains, Jilin province.
Lang Qi

Yak on the Tibet Plateau.
Liu Chen

today's Shanxi, Henan and Hebei provinces. Since then, however, their numbers and natural habitats have dwindled to the point where they exist only on the fringes of the Sichuan basin, and in isolated spots in Gansu and Shaanxi provinces.

For the past six or seven thousand years the Yangtze alligators inhabited the middle and lower reaches of the Changjiang River. But their numbers rapidly diminished in the latter part of the 19th century, and now these saurians are confined to a narrow area at the juncture of Anhui, Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces.

In the Tang dynasty (618-907), Malay alligators in the vicinity of Guangzhou were known to attack horses and oxen on dry land. Two hundred years ago they could still be found in Guangdong and Guangxi and the Penghu Islands. Today they are extinct in China.

About 3,000 to 4,000 years ago wild elephants, rhinoceroses, Malay tapirs, wild water buffaloes, David's deer, bamboo rats, racoon dogs, bears, tigers, leopards, hares and water deer proliferated in the lower reaches of the Huanghe River. Rhinoceroses, in particular, were so numerous that—as historians tell us—hunting expeditions would round them up by the scores, or even a hundred or more at a time. Even in the Tang dynasty, rhinoceroses still lived in

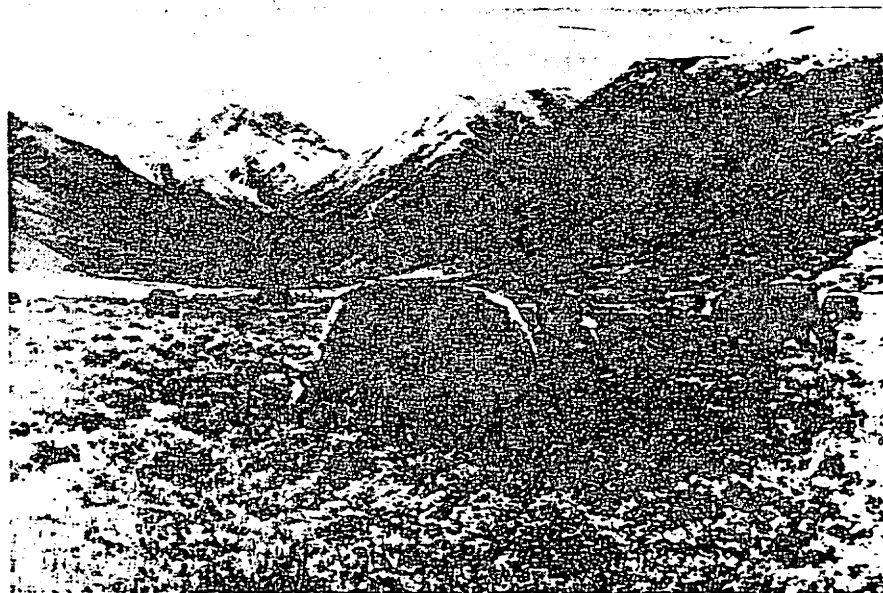
considerable numbers in Sichuan, Guizhou, Hunan and Hubei provinces along the Changjiang River. But by the late 19th or early 20th century, the last of China's wild rhinoceroses died out in the southwestern part of Yunnan province.

People in the north China plains began to domesticate wild elephants 3,000 years ago, according to historical studies. Significant is the fact that the character "yu", another name for Henan province, in its original pictographic form consisted of a man leading an elephant. In the Yin dynasty (c. 16th-11th centuries B.C.) they were first used in warfare, as far as we know. In the Tang and Song (960-1279) dynasties elephants were used to plow farmland in some parts of south and southwest China. Tang accounts also mention that elephant trunks were much sought after as a gastronomic treat by the inhabitants of what is now Guangdong province and the Leizhou Peninsula—which shows the prevalence of these pachyderms in those days. Today, only limited numbers survive in the southwestern part of Yunnan province.

Why the Changes?

For one thing, a changing environment.

Animal remains discovered at the Yin dynasty ruins at Anyang





White musk deer.

Li Delu



White chamois.

Li Delu



White bear.

Rare White Animals in Shennongjia

White chevrotains, white chamois and white bears have been discovered recently by members of a surveying team in the Shennongjia Mountains in northwestern Hubei province.

The existence of these unusual white animals, scientists believe, probably has something to do with the area's geological conditions, climate and environment. Since brown is the

usual color of these animals, the exact reason for their change in color is a matter of much interest and scientific significance.

The white bear living in Shennongjia at an altitude of 1,700 meters above sea level is unrelated to the polar bear of the Arctic Ocean; its habits are much the same as those of the black bear.

in northern Henan province indicate an environment entirely different from what it is today. Unearthed bones of wild elephants, rhinoceroses and Malay tapirs — all tropical fauna — show that the climate there was a good deal warmer 3,000 years ago. And also much wetter, making possible the growth of large tracts of lush grass and swampland flora, as indicated by the skeletons of such marsh animals as wild water buffalo, David's deer and Malay tapir. Remains of tigers, leopards, bears, badgers and bamboo rats point to the presence of vast forests and bamboo thickets.

Environmental changes came about as a result of a general drop in temperature in China over the past 2,500 years, added to the felling of forests and reclamation of swampland by expanding populations in the Huanghe River basin since the Western Zhou dynasty (c. 11th century-771 B.C.). Wild animals that could not adapt to the changes moved away or died out.

Another reason was the wholesale slaughter of wildlife. In

former times hunting was the primary occupation of the human population, and wildlife their main source of meat. Hunters managed to kill large numbers of wild animals with their crude hunting tools, even such big game as the rhinoceros. Later, the use of rhinoceros horns in medicine hastened the decimation of these luckless beasts. In areas south of the Nanling Mountains the local people used to pickle parrots in salt and cure the flesh of peacocks for their tables, with disastrous consequences for these species.

Lastly, certain declining species were no longer able to adapt to new conditions. Examples are the bulky rhinoceros which has a low reproduction rate and a gestation period as long as 400 to 500 days; and the giant pandas who give birth to at most two cubs a year, few of which survive. Other causes are the mature giant panda's large food requirement — 15 to 20 kg. of bamboo shoots daily, loss of cutting ability due to degeneration

of carnassial teeth, and devolution of offensive organs.

Since the founding of the new China in 1949, the people's government has paid much attention to the country's wildlife. A State Council directive in 1962 called for active protection of wildlife resources and laid down policies for their management. Measures were stipulated for such aspects as reproduction, domestication, hunting and rational utilization.

Such work came to a virtual standstill during the decade of turmoil brought about by the gang of four. It was resumed again in late seventies when the Chinese government promulgated the Forestry Law and Law on Environmental Protection and set up more than sixty nature preserves. But, China being such a large country, the existing preserves are still too few and too small. Government institutions are now studying further means by which the natural ecosystem and the wildlife therein can be effectively protected. □