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REQUIEM FOR A RIVER DOLPHIN

Fifteen years ago, Douglas Adams—author of the *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*—entreated us to grab our towels, head for China's Yangtze River, and take advantage of our last chance to see the Baiji dolphin, the 20-million-year old Goddess of the Yangtze.

I didn't go. I took a reassuring look at my "Don't Panic" button and turned my attention to Dan Quayle's spelling error, and listening for Ross Perot's "giant sucking sound."

Now it's too late. Scientists recently declared the Baiji extinct. It's been two years since the species was seen in the wild; four since the last captive Baiji died. Perhaps some still ply the Yangtze's waters, but not enough for long-term survival.

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but certainly for pause and humble reflection.”

Does it matter that we've one less neighbor on Earth? After all, extinction is intertwined with evolution the way death is intertwined with life. The Baiji's loss may not yet be cause for panic, but certainly for pause and humble reflection.

In the Bay Area we're blessed to live in one of the world's most biologically diverse regions. We share our lands with California tiger salamanders, Presidio Manzanita, and dozens of species that, like the Baiji, are found nowhere else on Earth.

The Baiji's demise was caused by habitat destruction, unsustainable fishing practices, and boat collisions. It was river kill of China's impressive climb towards modernity, traded away for comforts most of us take for granted.

The Bay Area no longer faces such stark choices, but we face choices nonetheless. Hardly a day passes without new proposals to turn wildlife habitat into another ball field or dog park, condos or parking lot.

Will we trade away our green sturgeon for another irrigation pump? Our snowy plovers so dogs can roam off-leash? Our answers to these questions will define our biological legacy. As we contemplate these choices, let's pause for the Baiji, say "so long," and thanks for the solemn lesson.

With a perspective, I'm Brent Plater.

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The EPA, meanwhile, spends less than 0.1 percent of its annual budget administering the program.

Indeed, the EPA regularly touts TRI as one of our nation's most effective environmental laws. And it is now emulated throughout the world. There are similar registries in Canada, Mexico, Japan, Australia, the European Union, and other countries.

This record of success should encourage an expansion of TRI. The program currently covers 654 toxic chemicals, which represent less than one percent of the more than 75,000 chemicals manufactured in the United States. Companies should be required to publicly report releases of other harmful chemicals, including greenhouse gas emissions (required by the European Union and proposed in California). In addition, facilities currently exempt from TRI, such as sewage treatment plants, airports, large agricultural operations, and auto service stations, should be brought into the program.

TRI can also be strengthened to create additional incentives for pollution reduction. While TRI has prompted reductions in toxic releases, the quantity of toxic chemicals generated and used by facilities has declined only slightly.

Going forward, companies should be required to report information about their chemical use and the amount of chemicals that remain in products. This is an approach followed with success by Massachusetts and New Jersey and advocated by the EPA itself under the Clinton administration.

From policing programs to school performance to medical error rates in hospitals, the public today is demanding increased accountability from public and private institutions. We should require no less from companies who daily expose us to thousands of toxic chemicals. A strong TRI program will help us realize this goal.

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