

Bold effort underway to save the vaquita porpoise from extinction



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With fewer than 30 vaquitas left in the wild, the 'panda of the sea' is the most endangered marine mammal in the world. Now a crazy plan might just save them.

If only all endangered species were as lucky as the vaquita porpoise (said with a sardonic twinge). With fewer than 30 *Phocoena sinus* individuals left in the upper Gulf of California (to which they are endemic), the Mexican government has committed more than \$100 million to save and protect the vaquita.

In April of 2015, Mexico's president Peña Nieto showed his dedication to the little porpoise – the smallest cetacean in the world, in fact – by announcing a two-year gillnet ban throughout the vaquitas' range, while also compensating shermen and related industries for their loss of income, and enhancing the multi-agency enforcement of the ban led by the Mexican Navy. Earlier this year, the gillnet ban was made permanent.

And now the government has assembled an international team of experts in northern Baja's San Felipe to begin a bold plan known as VaquitaCPR – the goal? To save the vaquita.

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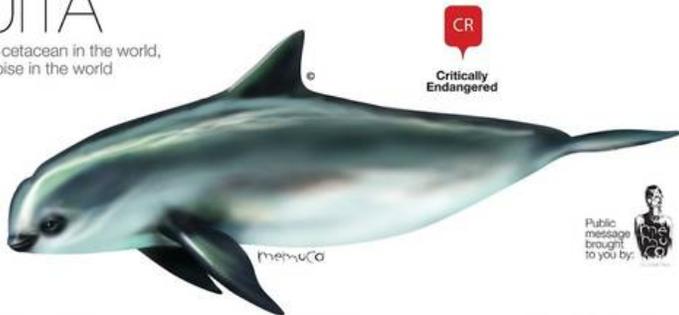
VAQUITA

The most endangered cetacean in the world, and the smallest porpoise in the world

Mortality in gillnets, trawl nets of various mesh size has long been recognized as the most serious and immediate threat to the vaquita's survival.

Endemic to a small area in the upper Gulf of California

They never stop smiling either :)



CR
Critically Endangered

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150 - 240

Approximate number in 2007 (Arhive)

BUT

39

Or more die each year in gill and trawl nets

AND

1,000

Gillnet boats might operate in vaquita habitat each year

The ambitious project involves finding and gathering the few remaining individuals and placing them in an ocean sanctuary off the coast of San Felipe. As soon as threats in their natural habitat – mainly gillnets and illegal fishing – have been expelled, the goal is to release them back into wild.

"Rescuing these animals and placing them in a temporary sanctuary is necessary to protect them until their natural habitat can be made safe," said Dr. Lorenzo Rojas-Bracho, lead vaquita expert and chair of the International Committee for the Recovery of the Vaquita (CIRVA). "We realize that capturing even a few vaquitas will be very difficult, but if we don't try the vaquita will disappear from the planet forever."

Field operations began on October 12; an acoustic monitoring system will be used to help locate the porpoises. The system has been used since 2012 by WWF and the National Institute of Ecology and Climate Change of Mexico (INECC) to monitor the vaquita's population. Large floating sea pens have been set up in the area so that veterinarians and animal care experts can closely monitor the rescued ones.



© Kerry Coughlin/National Marine Mammal Foundation | A floating sea pen is anchored off the coast of San Felipe, Mexico where vaquitas will temporarily be held.

WWF will also be focused on locating and removing lost and/or abandoned "ghost" nets, which become drifting deadly animal traps; they tangle vaquita and many other marine species as well. Smartly, and good for everyone involved, the acoustic monitoring as well as the net sleuthing are done with the help and wisdom of local fishermen.

"Although this effort faces a lot of uncertainty and is highly risky, WWF recognizes it as a necessary action to save the vaquita from extinction. WWF supports CPR with the sole aim of returning a healthy vaquita population to the wild, and as such our primary focus will continue to be ensuring a healthy, gillnet-free Upper Gulf of California where both wildlife and local communities can thrive. We remain hopeful that together with all actors, we will see the CPR effort become a success", said Jorge Rickards, CEO of WWF Mexico.



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With so much expertise on deck, and so much support for this beleaguered species, there is much hope for success – as novel as the plan may be. It's an amazing effort and a heartening thing to see. And if indeed the vaquita can be saved, it may bode well for other endangered marine mammals.

"The international team of experts that have stepped up to save the most endangered marine mammal on the planet is extraordinary and a project like this has never been tried before," said Cynthia Smith, Executive Director of the National Marine Mammal Foundation.

"VaquitaCPR is important because if this conservation model works," she adds, "we may be able to use a similar approach to save other marine mammals that face extinction."

May the Gulf of California once again be home to legions of frolicking vaquitas, and may their good fortune be contagious.