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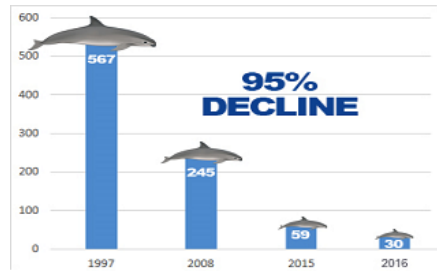
Vaquita Synopsis

last updated: 6 February 2018
Update! Latest CIRVA report available.

([esta página en español](#) 19 Sep 2016)

The vaquita, a small porpoise found only in the northern Gulf of California in Mexico, is the most endangered of the world's 128 species of marine mammal. Vaquitas are endangered due to accidental deaths in fishing nets set for fish and shrimp. Fewer than 30 vaquitas

remain and the species will soon be extinct unless the mortality in fishing nets is eliminated.



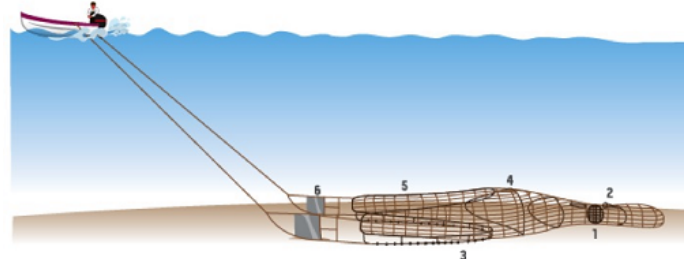
Decline in vaquita numbers over time. CIRVA VIII report.



Entanglement in gillnets has posed a risk to vaquita for decades. Photo: C. Faesi / Proyecto Vaquita 1992.

Vaquitas have among the smallest geographical distribution of any of the whales, dolphins and porpoises (see red box on map). They live in the northern Gulf of California's highly productive waters which are also excellent for producing fish and shrimp sold for both domestic and U.S. consumption. Fishing is a major source of income for the local communities and gillnets are the most commonly used gear. Gillnets are designed to entangle the targeted fish and shrimp but vaquitas can also become accidentally wrapped in the nets and drown.

The vaquita's fate has long been tied to that of the totoaba, a large fish that grows to over 6 feet and over 200 pounds. This endangered fish is prized for its swim bladder (an internal air-filled sac that helps the fish maintain buoyancy), which is exported to China where it is used in soup, as traditional medicine and as an investment. Thousands of swim bladders are dried and smuggled out of Mexico, often through the U.S. Fishermen may receive up to \$8,500 for each kilogram of totoaba swim bladder, equivalent to a large portion of a year's income from legal fishing activities.



© G. Ybarra / WWF Mexico, 2013


Small-type trawl gear approved to replace gillnets. Courtesy of WWF Mexico 2013.

To save the vaquita, scientists agree that the only solution is to totally eliminate fishing with gillnets within vaquita habitat.

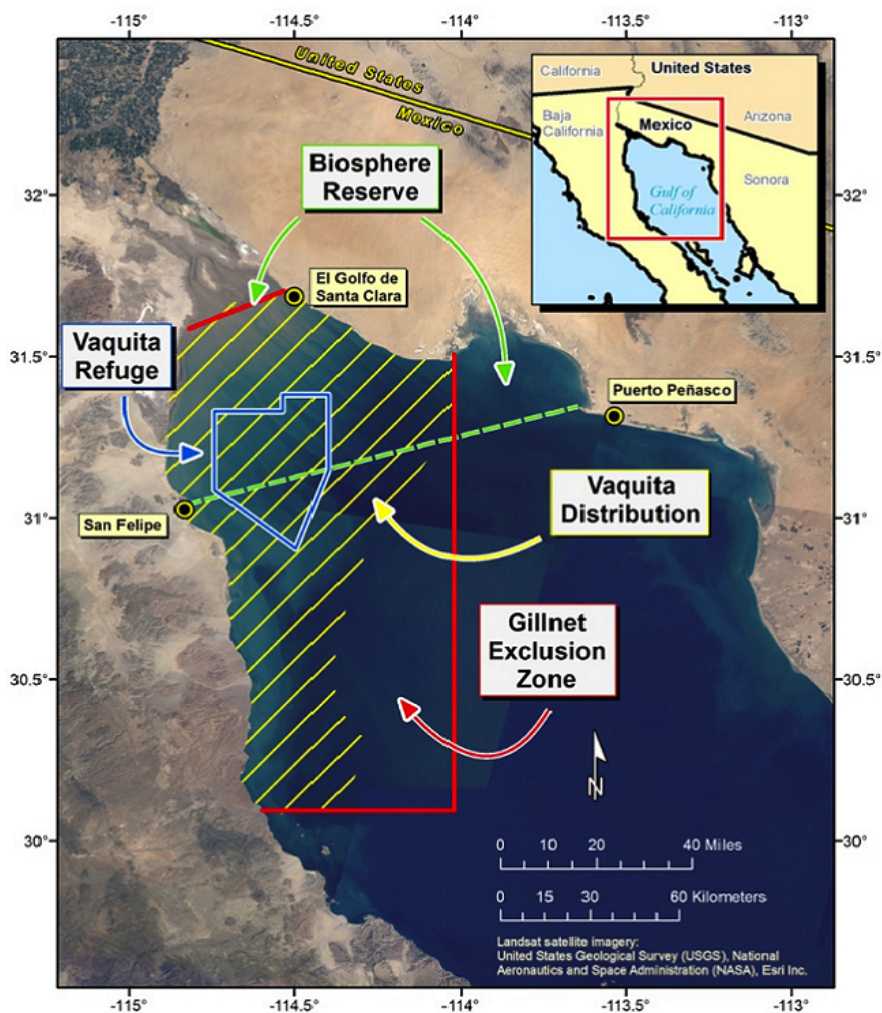
Without precedence anywhere in the world, Mexico is responding

to the urgent need for action. Working alongside scientists, non-governmental agencies and foundations, the government of Mexico has taken a number of actions over the years to reduce the number of gillnets; these actions may have slowed, but did not stop, the decline of the species. Then, in April of 2015, President Peña Nieto traveled to San Felipe, one of the main fishing towns, and announced a two-year emergency gillnet ban throughout vaquita habitat combined with enhanced multi-agency enforcement led by the Navy and compensation to the fishermen and related industries for their loss of income. In September 2015, the government of Mexico also launched an extensive survey of the vaquita population using an approach that includes both ship-based visual monitoring and an expanded grid of acoustic detectors throughout vaquita habitat. The results confirmed the continued dramatic decline: the 2015 abundance was estimated to be 59 (Taylor et al. 2016) and the latest population estimate is 30 (CIRVA VIII, 2016).

With the population continuing in steep decline, it is clear that the vaquita will be extinct in a few years. In June 2017 a permanent ban was published in Mexican regulations that made illegal the use or transport of gillnets with exemptions for two fish species (curvina and sierra). Night fishing was banned and legal entry and exit points were restricted. Since many of these provisions were temporarily in place from 2015-2017 and illegal fishing occurred at high rates, enforcement is clearly critical and the effect on vaquita remains to be seen. The ban is the last chance for vaquita and also creates opportunities to continue efforts to develop and implement alternative fishing methods that do not endanger vaquitas and provide support for local communities.

In Fall 2017, the Mexican government initiated an effort to move as many vaquitas as possible into protective sanctuary until gillnets are eliminated and vaquita-friendly fishing methods are adopted. An international collaboration led by Mexico's Ministry of the Environment and Natural Resources brought together 90 scientists from 9 countries to carry out this effort. However, rescue operations were suspended when it was found that vaquitas reacted poorly to being in a new environment and an adult female died. Read more about the project: [VaquitaCPR](#). 

With fewer than 30 vaquitas remaining, the risk of extinction remains extremely high. Efforts of international collaboration continue, as do efforts to strengthen enforcement, remove derelict fishing gear, and to implement alternative fishing gears.



Satellite view of the northern Gulf of California with the vaquita distribution shown by yellow cross hatching. The gillnet exclusion zone for the 2-year ban is within the area bounded by the red line. The Vaquita Refuge, which remains a no fishing zone, is outlined in blue. Note the correspondence between the vaquita distribution and the muddy water that results from strong tidal currents stirring up the muddy bottom resulting from deposits laid down by the outflow of the Colorado River. Credit: CIRVA V.

Read more:

- NOAA Fisheries Southwest Fisheries Science Center: [Vaquita Expedition 2015](#)
- IUCN [Cetacean Specialist Group](#)
- Marine Mammal Society: [Vaquita news](#)
- Mexico's Ministry of the Environment and Natural Resources
- Mexico's Program for the Protection of the Vaquita
- Rojas-Bracho, L. and Reeves, R. R. (2013). Vaquitas and gillnets: Mexico's ultimate cetacean conservation challenge. *Endangered Species Research* 21: 77-87

Multi-media:

- Chris Johnson/earthOCEAN: [vaquita tv](#)
- [Net Loss: New Abundance Estimate Reveals that Mexico's Vaquita Faces Imminent Extinction Due to Illegal Fishing](#). A lecture by Barbara Taylor (SWFSC) for the Jeffrey B. Graham Perspectives on Ocean Science Lecture Series at the Birch Aquarium, UC San Diego (July 2016.)

Last modified: 2/6/2018

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