

# Vaquitas



Vaquita, the world's most rare marine mammal, is on the edge of extinction. This little porpoise wasn't discovered until 1958 and a little over half a century later, we are on the brink of losing them forever. Vaquitas are often caught and drowned in gillnets used by illegal fishing operations in marine protected areas within Mexico's Gulf of California. More than half of the population has been lost in the last three years. The vaquita has a large dark ring around its eyes and dark patches on its lips that form a thin line from the mouth to the pectoral fins. Its dorsal surface is dark gray, sides pale gray and ventral surface white with long, light gray markings. Newborn vaquitas have darker coloration and a wide gray fringe of color that runs from the head to the dorsal flukes, passing through the dorsal and pectoral fins. They are most often found close to shore in the Gulf's shallow waters, although they quickly swim away if a boat approaches.

## **Population of world's most endangered marine mammal drops 40 percent**

The vaquita porpoise is growing nearer to extinction: Population has declined 40% to around 60 individuals, down from an estimated population of 97 vaquitas in 2014.

## **WHY THEY MATTER**



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# WHAT WWF IS DOING

## MEXICAN GOVERNMENT AND WWF ESTABLISH INTERNATIONAL EXPERT COMMITTEE TO BOOST VAQUITA-SAFE FISHING

In July 2016, President Barack Obama and President Enrique Peña Nieto of Mexico announced bilateral collaboration measures to protect the vaquita. As a follow-up to this meeting and to the recommendations CIRVA presented in its latest vaquita report, Mexico's National Institute of Fisheries (INAPESCA) and WWF Mexico established an international committee of experts to further develop and urgently implement vaquita-safe fishing technologies.

The experts committee will advise the Mexican government on improving fishing techniques not harmful to vaquita, including those that INAPESCA and WWF Mexico have together developed over the last years.

This independent committee has been charged with improving existing vaquita-safe fishing technologies (such as the small trawl to catch shrimp and traps and other gear for fish) to substitute gillnets which will be permanently prohibited starting September in the Upper Gulf of California, the only place on Earth where the vaquita exists.

The committee is comprised of experts from Texas A&M University, NOAA South East Fisheries Center, Swedish University of Agriculture Science, Technological University of Denmark, Canada's Fisheries and Marine Institute, New England Aquarium, FAO, INAPESCA and WWF.

A protocol and guidelines to catch shrimp with vaquita-safe technology is expected to be ready soon.

The vaquita is the most endangered cetacean in the world. With likely fewer than 60 left, the species will become extinct without a fully enforced gillnet ban throughout their entire range. WWF is urgently working to ensure they can live and thrive in their natural habitat.

The vaquita will be extinct, possibly by 2018, if fishery bycatch is not eliminated immediately. Nearly one out of every five vaquita get entangled and drown in gillnets intended for other marine species like the totoaba, a critically endangered fish also found in the upper Gulf of California. Entanglement in gillnets set for totoaba was the primary cause that brought the vaquita to low levels by the mid-1970s. Totoaba were overfished by the mid-1970s and were listed as endangered by Mexico in 1975, and by the US in 1979.

Today, international trade in totoaba is banned under CITES but high demand from China for its swim bladder has led to a corresponding boom in illegal totoaba fishing in the past few years. Thousands of swim bladders are dried and smuggled out of Mexico, often through the United States. Fishermen receive around \$4,000 for each pound of totoaba swim bladder, equivalent to half a year's income from legal fishing activities. It is this illegal trade that is currently driving the precipitous decline in vaquita numbers.

## A fishing boat in the Gulf of California.



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## **SAVING THE LAST OF THE VAQUITAS**

WWF is on red alert after a recent report from the International Committee for the Recovery of the Vaquita (CIRVA) estimated the vaquita population at less than 60. In the past, WWF has helped study vaquitas and implement protective measures with the Mexican government and local partners. We have been working with Mexican scientists, government representatives, and other partners and collaborators to develop a long-term strategy for conservation of the species.

We are now calling for urgent and immediate measures to save the last of the vaquitas. Based on expert recommendations, WWF calls on the Mexican government to strongly enforce a ban on gillnet fisheries throughout the entire range of the species starting in September 2014. We also ask that the US and China help stamp out the illegal trade in totoaba products and provide enforcement support to the Mexican government, without which vaquitas will go the way of the dodo.

*All vaquita photos on this page by Thomas A. Jefferson from the joint research project with the Marine Mammals Research and Conservation Coordination of the National Institute of Ecology of Mexico. Photo obtained under permit No. DR7488708 of SEMARNAT*

