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Scientific Committee issues first ever extinction alert: grave concern for the survival of the vaquita porpoise

**“Despite nearly thirty years of repeated warnings, the vaquita hovers
on the edge of extinction due to gillnet entanglement.”**



Vaquita displaying the characteristic dark eye-patch and shown in the calm conditions needed to detect this cryptic porpoise species. Credit: Thomas A. Jefferson, Viva Vaquita

The plight of the vaquita porpoise has led the Scientific Committee of the IWC to issue its first ever Extinction Alert. The vaquita is a small porpoise found only in the Gulf of California, Mexico. There are about 10 surviving individuals and the Scientific Committee is speaking out now because it believes extinction is not yet inevitable. Despite the very low number of surviving animals, 100% enforcement of a ban on gillnets in their core habitat would still give this small but resilient porpoise a chance of recovery.

The Committee has provided advice on all aspects of cetacean science since the IWC was established in 1946. It is made up of around 200 world-leading scientists who have recently

reached the sombre conclusion that a new mechanism is needed to voice extinction concerns for an increasing range of cetacean species and populations.

This first Extinction Alert statement is issued today in order to encourage wider recognition of the warning signs of impending extinctions, and to generate support and encouragement at every level for the actions needed now to save the vaquita. The statement says:

“The decline of the vaquita has continued despite a very clear understanding of both the cause (bycatch in gillnets) and the solution (replacement of gillnets with safe alternatives in the vaquita habitat).”

The Committee points to lessons that can be learned, particularly the need for early and multi-disciplinary actions that look beyond the immediate conservation concern to address wider factors, but today their focus is the clear, single action needed now to save the vaquita.

“The extinction of the vaquita is inevitable unless 100% of gillnets are substituted immediately with alternative fishing gears that protect the vaquita and the livelihoods of fishers. If this doesn’t happen now, it will be too late.”

-ends

Notes to Editors

- Read the full text of [the IWC Extinction Alert: Statement of Concern for the Vaquita](#). Available from 0001 on 07 August.
- The vaquita is only found in the northern Gulf of California, Mexico.

- Numbers have fallen from a population of approximately 567 in 1997 to around 10 animals in 2018. This number appears to have remained fairly constant since 2018, probably due to increased enforcement of gillnet bans and removal of nets. But this effort needs to be 100% effective to start reversing the decline and bringing the vaquita back from the brink of extinction. An illegal, international trade in totoaba fish, found in the same waters, has complicated efforts to end gillnet fishing.
- For media interviews, including with the Chair and Vice-chair of the IWC Scientific Committee, and further information, contact kate.wilson@iwc.int

Downloadable Images and Footage



Lone vaquita (foreground, left) with fishing vessels.
Credit: Paula Olson



Vaquita, displaying the characteristic dark eye-patch, shown in the calm conditions needed to detect this cryptic species.
Credit: Thomas A Jefferson, Viva Vaquita



Lone vaquita, monitored from a distance by the research vessel Wanderlust.
Credit: Ralph Pace, Vaquita CPR



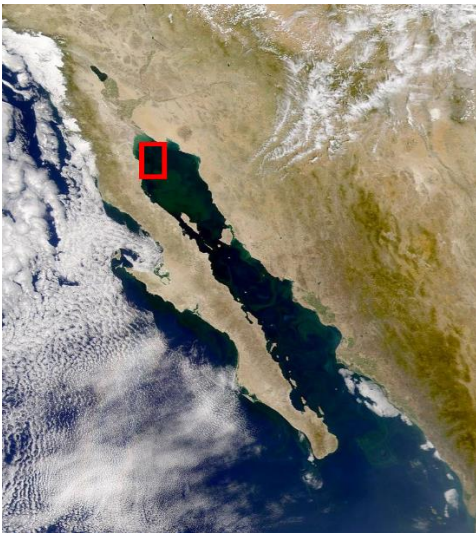
Scientists scan the ocean from the vantage point of a 'flying deck' high above the water on the research vessel Narval.
Credit: Juan Carlos Salinas, Museo de la Ballena y Ciencias del Mar



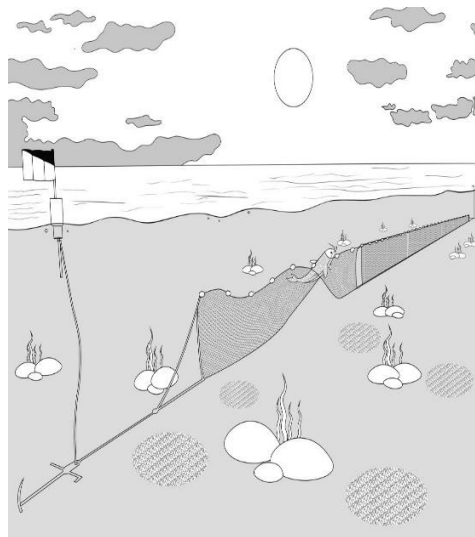
Researchers search for vaquita using 'big-eyes' - giant binoculars used to spot tiny porpoises from the decks of the research vessel David Starr Jordan
Credit: Chris Johnson, WWF



CPOD acoustic detectors are used to locate the vaquita. This one is retrieved, itself entangled in gillnets.
Credit: Paco Valverde



The Upper Gulf of California, Mexico. The small red box shows the only place in the world where vaquita are found.
Credit: NOAA



Gillnets trap cetaceans and prevent them reaching the surface to breathe. Bycatch in fishing gear is estimated to kill over 300,000 cetaceans every year.
Credit: IWC



Video footage of vaquita from Expedition Vaquita, 2008
Credit: Chris Johnson, WWF



Video footage of vaquita from the research vessel Narval
Credit: Malca Jano, Museo de la Ballena y Ciencias del Mar.