

Porpoises
Animal magic

#WorldOceansDay: vaquita porpoises are fast dying out - can a radical rescue plan save them?

It's World Ocean Day, so spare a thought for the vaquita - by the end of 2017, there could be just 15 of these small porpoises left



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@WayOffThePanda

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A vaquita in the Gulf of California Photograph: Tom Jefferson/VIVA Vaquita

In a few months, conservationists will converge on the Gulf of California in a last-ditch effort to save the vaquita from extinction, a species of tiny porpoise. The scientists face an unprecedented challenge: to bring as many vaquita into captivity as possible.

When the Vaquita CPR rescue plan was announced back in April, I interviewed several scientists for Nature News. At that point, the best estimate was that there were just 30 vaquita left. It now looks like there are fewer than this.

At the end of April, members of the Comité Internacional para la Recuperación de la Vaquita (CIRVA) met in La Jolla, California to review the latest data. Between 6 March and 17 April this year, acoustic monitors set in the Gulf of California recorded the vocalisations of just two vaquita, “far fewer than expected based on detection levels in 2016.” A further two individuals were sighted on 1 May. But, according to the report from the CIRVA meeting published last month, “these observations indicate that the extremely small vaquita population has been further reduced in size in the past few months.” Indeed, between 2015 and 2016, the population halved from 60 to 30 and “this trend appears to be continuing in 2017.” That would mean that there could just be 15 left by the end of the year.

The porpoise decline is mainly because they are being caught and drowned in gillnets set in the in the Gulf for huge bass-like fish called the totoaba. In 2015, the Mexican government imposed a two-year ban on this fishery. “Thanks to the two-year ban we still have vaquita,” Lorenzo Rojas-Bracho of the Instituto Nacional de Ecología y Cambio Climático in Ensenada, Mexico and chair of the Comité Internacional para la Recuperación de la Vaquita (CIRVA) told me back in April. “Without it we wouldn’t have anything by now.” But as the totoaba’s swim bladder can fetch tens of thousands of dollars on the black market in China, there are plenty of fisherman prepared to flout the ban. “There’s so much money in the black market for the totoaba’s swim bladder. Nobody has been able to control illegal fishing 100%.”



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With gillnets still in place and the vaquita population in freefall, there is a real urgency. The first step of the rescue plan will be to catch as many of the remaining vaquita as possible. This will take place in October when the Gulf is relatively calm and sightings are easier to make. The idea is to transfer any captured vaquita by vessel small pens set in the Gulf until the immediate danger posed by gillnets has been removed.

The project will involve many firsts. Nobody has ever attempted to catch a vaquita alive. Nobody has ever transported a live vaquita. Nobody has ever kept a vaquita in captivity. And nobody, therefore, has ever overseen captive breeding in this species.

But with Mexico’s Secretaría de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (SEMARNAT) committing \$3 million to the rescue operation in April and the The Association of Zoos and Aquariums raising an additional \$1 million, there are funds in place. Scientists and conservationists from all round the world are also bringing a wide range of expertise to the project. “If this works it’s because we have the best minds and the most committed people, many working pro bono,” said Rojas-Bracho. “If something fails that we didn’t foresee, it will be hard to imagine any other group guessing this was going to happen.”

For more information on the Vaquita CPR initiative and to make a donation, visit the National Marine Mammal Foundation. To petition Mexico’s president Peña Nieto in an effort to strengthen enforcement of the gillnet ban, there are petitions at both AVAAZ and change.org.

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#WorldOceansDay: vaquita porpoises are fast dying out - can a radical rescue plan save them? I hope so! But it sounds like its all too late. Like the baiji which is a recently extinct species of freshwater dolphin formerly found only in the Yangtze River in China many other Dolphins and porpoises are being pushed into extinction. In Hong Kong the Pink Dolphins (Chinese White Dolphin) and Finless porpoises may well become locally extinct in the next decade or sooner due to marine infrastructure developments and water poisoned the Pearl river bringing PCBs and toxic heavy metals into their habitats. We are now going past the tipping point of so many species. RIP Biodiversity.

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AldousOrwell 4d ago 2 ↑

I sincerely wish the vaquitas best of luck, and even more deeply hope that the perpetuation of my own species is exactly linked with the perpetuation of theirs.

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