

World's rarest cetacean threatened by illegal gillnets

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The world's rarest cetacean could disappear in less than four years unless immediate action is taken by the Mexican government to protect it from entanglement in gillnets deployed illegally in its Gulf of California refuge, federal officials said Tuesday.

Fewer than 100 critically endangered vaquitas remain in the wild, and U.S. officials and conservationists are urging Mexico to crack down on shrimp gillnetters operating within the 488-square-mile refuge created to protect the 5-foot-long, porpoise-like species.

Vaquitas are also being decimated by illegal trade of an endangered fish known as totoaba, which is supplying a demand for [swim bladders](#) in China.

"Time is running out," Rebecca Lent, executive director of the Marine Mammal Commission, an independent U.S. agency, said in an interview. "The government of Mexico has made an effort, but it has been ineffective. What we need is a firm commitment by Mexico to stop the gillnetting. Now."

The elusive and timid members of the porpoise family inhabit the shallow, murky coastal waters of the Colorado River delta area of the Gulf of California, where they are currently declining by as much as 18 percent each year.

"It's hard for Mexico to find the political will and resources needed to

buy out the illegal fisheries," Andrew Read, a professor of marine biology at Duke University and an expert on vaquitas, said. "We understand that drug cartels have become involved in the [illegal trade](#) of swim bladders, which makes enforcement especially difficult."

In a recent letter to Mexican President Enrique Pena Nieto, a coalition of 28 conservation groups including the American Cetacean Society, the Center for Biological Diversity and the International Fund for Animal Welfare warned that they are pursuing a variety of actions to obtain urgently needed protections to prevent "the first extinction of a cetacean endemic to North America."

Those actions include filing a lawsuit to enforce the "foreign bycatch" provision of the U.S. Marine Mammal Protection Act, which could result in a ban on all shrimp imports in Southern California and elsewhere that are not "vaquita-safe," and petitioning the Obama administration to impose trade sanctions on Mexico for not adequately enforcing a ban on illegal totoaba trade.

In the meantime, conservationists are monitoring the situation with aerial surveillance cameras. Separately, a international team of scientists is tracking the species with 48 hydrophones mounted on the bottom of the ocean to pick up vaquita vocal "clicks."

Aerial photographs taken last week showed at least 17 gillnetting boats operating illegally within the vaquita refuge.

Mexican authorities have called for a new "vaquita abundance survey," which would take significant time and money to complete.

But Lent argued, "We don't need another study. The best scientists in the world have already looked at the data and concluded that the decline of the vaquita has accelerated because of unregulated gillnetting.

"The vaquita," she added, "may go extinct in 2018 - just six decades after it was discovered."

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