

Bycatch threatens marine mammals, but new protections hold promise for Mexican vaquita

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Vaquita are among the most endangered marine mammals on earth, with fewer than 100 remaining. Credit: Paula Olson

Gillnetting around the world is ensnaring hundreds of thousands of small cetaceans every year, threatening several species of dolphins and porpoises with extinction, according to research presented at the [Society of Marine Mammalogy's 21st biennial conference](#) in San Francisco this week.

But there is one bright spot in the Gulf of California, where Mexican authorities earlier this year instituted an emergency two-year ban on gillnetting to help save the critically endangered vaquita, now the rarest marine mammal [species](#) on the planet. Fewer than 100 vaquita remain, scientists speaking at the conference said.

On Monday the Society of Marine Mammalogy will recognize Mexican officials including President Enrique Peña Nieto, Secretary of Environment and Natural Resources, Rafael Pacchiano, top Mexican biologists, economists and fishermen with its first-ever Conservation Merit Prize. The prize will recognize the recipients for their determination to save the vaquita and help local fishermen transition to fishing gear friendly to the small porpoise whose entire population lives in the northern Gulf of California, Mexico. Secretary Pacchiano will be present to accept the award on behalf of the Mexican government.

Scientists at the conference said there is a great need for a success story demonstrating that sustainable fishing can coexist with marine mammals, and they hope the vaquita can provide it.

"This is the first large-scale gillnet ban to save a species from extinction, and includes provisions for the development of alternative [fishing gear](#) to replace gillnets," said Barbara Taylor, chair of the Society's Conservation Committee, who recently returned from more than two months aboard a research ship surveying the northern Gulf of California for vaquita. "We have great hope that this will be the model that shows the world it is truly possible to bring a species back from the brink of extinction."

The award presentation will provide some of the conference's most hopeful news for marine mammals in peril from threats ranging from climate change to chemical contaminants. Many other threatened species from polar bears to manatees will also be the focus of new studies and

research presented at the conference, the largest gathering of [marine mammal](#) researchers in the world.

Provided by NOAA Headquarters

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