

International effort announced to try to save the world's most endangered marine mammal

January 18 2017



A vaquita porpoise swims in the Gulf of California. Less than 60 are thought to exist. Credit: Thomas A. Jefferson/VIVA Vaquita

An ambitious, emergency plan to help save the vaquita porpoise from

extinction in the northern Gulf of California has been recommended by the International Committee for the Recovery of the Vaquita (CIRVA). The plan involves relocating some of the remaining vaquitas to a temporary sanctuary, while crucial efforts aimed at eliminating illegal fishing and removing gillnets from their environment continue. The emergency action plan will be led by the Mexican government and supported by a consortium of marine mammal experts from more than a dozen organizations around the world.

Despite substantial efforts by the Mexican government to protect vaquitas, the recovery team recently reviewed the latest results from advanced acoustic monitoring technology that showed the vaquita population continuing to rapidly decline. "We are watching this precious native species disappear before our eyes," said Rafael Pacchiano, Mexico's Secretary of the Environment and Natural Resources. "This critical rescue effort is a priority for the Mexican government and we are dedicated to providing the necessary resources in order to give the plan its best chance of success." The plan will be implemented in tandem with ongoing efforts to remove the threat of gillnets in the Upper Gulf of California and eliminate [illegal fishing](#).

VaquitaCPR (Conservation, Protection and Recovery) is an [emergency action](#) plan of the Mexican government with the input of an expert group of conservation scientists and [marine mammal](#) veterinarians. Recovery operations are set to begin in Mexico in the next few months. The plan acknowledges the many uncertainties involved in finding, catching and maintaining vaquitas in a temporary sanctuary. Vaquitas are not only rare, they avoid motorized vessels and no one can predict how they will react. "Unlike condors, we expect that most vaquitas will remain in the wild as capturing even a few will be very difficult," says Dr. Lorenzo Rojas-Bracho, lead vaquita researcher and head of CIRVA. "Having some is still better than having none. The decline is happening faster than solutions for illegal fishing, so we need to have multiple strategies."

While the vaquita is the animal most critically affected by the illegal fishing nets now, the lives of many other important species are also in jeopardy from the very same nets. Even if we are not able to save the vaquita, the situation must be controlled to protect turtles, sharks, dolphins and many other marine creatures. "Experts from around the world have come together and are working to save the vaquita in much the same way conservationists rescued the California condor from extinction in the 1980s," said Dr. Sam Ridgway, President of the National Marine Mammal Foundation. "We recognize that the odds are stacked against us, but the conservation and scientific communities feel a duty to act and we hope our collective expertise can make a difference."

The emergency action plan has been adopted by Secretaría de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (SEMARNAT) on the recommendation of their expert advisory group, the Comité Internacional Para La Recuperación De La Vaquita (CIRVA). Under SEMARNAT leadership, the National Marine Mammal Foundation, The Marine Mammal Center, and the Chicago Zoological Society will help coordinate the efforts of a multi-institutional, international conservation team.

The precipitous decline of the vaquita has been primarily driven by accidental deaths of the porpoises in fishing gillnets. In 2015, the Mexican government instituted a two-year gillnet ban over the range of the vaquita. Additionally, the Mexican government implemented a financial compensation program to provide income to fishermen affected by the two-year gillnet ban. Despite strong enforcement, illegal gillnets are still being set to catch an endangered fish known as totoaba, the swim bladders of which fetch large sums of money on Hong Kong and Chinese black markets. Thus, despite tens of millions of dollars invested by the Mexican government in preventing vaquita by-catch, the population continues to decline.

Provided by National Marine Mammal Foundation

Citation: International effort announced to try to save the world's most endangered marine mammal (2017, January 18) retrieved 17 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2017-01-international-effort-world-endangered-marine.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.