

Mexico arrests 'hitman' for trafficking endangered fish

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View of dried swim bladders of totoaba fish, which despite an international ban on trade could still be found for sale in Guangzhou, capital of China's southern Guangdong province, in March 2018

Mexico has arrested an alleged drug cartel hitman on charges of trafficking the critically endangered totoaba fish, a species whose swim bladder can fetch up to \$20,000 on the black market in China.

The suspect, identified as Oscar N, alias "El Parra," was arrested Thursday on charges of leading a top totoaba trafficking gang, said the government of the northern state of Baja California.

The gang is believed to have ties to the powerful Sinaloa drug cartel, the state authorities said in a statement.

El Parra is a "dangerous hitman and drug trafficker" who was also wanted on a homicide charge, it said.

The state sits on the Gulf of California, the native habitat for the totoaba.

Known as the "cocaine of the sea" for its lucrative price, the species has been in steep decline since the 1940s, largely because of its reputed healing powers in Chinese medicine.

In China, the totoaba's [swim bladder](#) is believed to have beautifying properties and cure a host of ailments, from arthritis pain to discomfort during pregnancy.

In fact, they are so prized that some Chinese simply display them in fancy cases in their homes.

The illegal fishing trade has turned increasingly violent in recent years, and has also claimed a collateral victim: the nearly extinct [vaquita](#) marina, the world's smallest porpoise, which can end up caught in the nets used to fish for totoaba.

Researchers estimate there are less than 30 vaquitas left today.

To save the species, Mexico has banned fishing in a giant 1,800-square kilometer (700-square mile) area.

The move was backed by the likes of Hollywood heartthrob and conservationist Leonardo DiCaprio and Carlos Slim, the Mexican telecoms billionaire who is one of the world's richest people.

The government also tried to catch vaquitas with the aid of US Navy-trained dolphins and breed them in a protected reserve. But the program was aborted last year after a vaquita died in captivity.

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