

Mexico launches drones to protect endangered porpoise

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The Mexican Navy, pictured in March, 2016, is carrying out an operation to arrest illegal fishermen using nets to catch the Totoaba macdonaldi fish, because the illegal gill-nets frequently trap the rare Phocoena sinus or "vaquita marina" in Spanish

Mexico's government has launched three drones to back efforts to prevent illegal fishing activities that have led to the near extinction of the vaquita marina, the world's smallest porpoise.

The navy and the environment ministry on Thursday unveiled the Arcturus T-20 [unmanned aerial vehicle](#), armed with high-resolution cameras to police the upper Gulf of California day and night.

It is the latest step taken by the government to save the vaquita, a species found only in a small area of Mexico's northwest Gulf.

"There is a lot left to be done and time is a decisive factor," Admiral Vidal Francisco Soberon, the navy's chief, said. "We can't allow our seas to see another species disappear."

President Enrique Pena Nieto deployed navy ships in April 2015 to enforce a two-year ban on gillnets and increased the vaquita protection area tenfold to 13,000 square kilometers (5,000 square miles).

But a census released last May warned that there are only 60 of the sea creatures left, down from fewer than 100 in 2014 and 200 in 2012. Scientists fear the porpoise could vanish by 2022.

The vaquita's fate has been linked to a critically endangered fish, the totoaba, which is illegally caught for swim bladders that are dried and sold on the black market in China.



This handout photo released by World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and taken on February 1992 in Santa Clara Gulf, Sonora, Mexico shows a comparison between "Vaquita Marina" (bottom) (*Phocoena sinus*) and Totoaba fish (top) (*Totoaba macdonaldi*)

The vaquita, a shy 1.5-meter-long (five-foot) cetacean—a kind of marine mammal—with dark rings around the eyes, is said to be the victim of bycatch in illegal totoaba gillnets.

The authorities announced last week that the ban on gillnets for shrimp fishing in the vaquita habitat will be made permanent from September.

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