

Rare vaquita porpoise found dead in Mexico

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Scientists say there are only about 30 vaquita porpoises left

An endangered vaquita porpoise was found dead in the Gulf of Mexico, the country's environmental protection authority said Wednesday, bringing to four the number of dead vaquitas found in 2017.

There are only 30 remaining vaquitas (*Phocoena sinus*), scientists warned in February.

The rare mammals, the world's smallest porpoise, live exclusively in the

Gulf of Mexico. Scientists warn that they face extinction by 2022.

The remains of the vaquita were found Tuesday, 24 kilometers (15 miles) north of the town of San Felipe, in the state of Baja California on the Barra del Primer Estero beach, the statement read.

The remains of the young vaquita, which measured 115 centimeters (45 inches) long, was in such an advanced state of decomposition that experts were unable to determine its sex.

However, they did see cuts and lacerations indicating that the animal had possibly been trapped in a net, "which we can suppose was the cause of its death."

Authorities say the vaquitas have been dying for years in gillnets that are meant to illegally catch another endangered species, a large fish called the totoaba.

Smugglers ship the dried swim bladder of the totoaba to China, where it fetches tens of thousands of dollars and is eaten in soup.

President Enrique Peña Nieto deployed the navy in 2015 to stop illegal fishing, increased the vaquita protection area and imposed a two-year ban on gillnets. Drones joined the effort last year.

In a bid to save the vaquitas, the Mexican government announced plans on April 4 to place some of them in a temporary refuge.

The environment ministry said the "ambitious emergency plan" would be carried out with help from international conservation groups.

However, the plan is controversial as some conservationists say the vaquita is not an animal that can thrive in captivity.

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