



MARK CARWARDINE

WILD THOUGHTS

First, it was the Yangtze river dolphin, declared extinct a few months ago, and now it is the turn of the vaquita. This delightful little porpoise hasn't disappeared just yet, but without immediate and drastic action it could be extinct within two years.

Few people have seen a living vaquita, which means 'little cow' in Spanish. Even on official surveys of its home in the northern end of the Sea of Cortez, in Mexico, it often eludes teams of professional biologists for days or even weeks at a time. I was lucky enough to see a lone individual from a light aircraft many years ago, about 40km east of San Felipe. I can't say it was a particularly impressive sighting – two fleeting glimpses of a small, stocky and predominantly drab grey animal – but I feel privileged to have seen one at all.

At the time there were believed to be 500 to 600 vaquitas left. Researchers feared the worst even then, estimating that about 80 of them were being caught and drowned in fishing nets every year. Not surprisingly, the latest population estimate just released is 150 – and falling.

There is only one solution – the nets must come out of the water. According to a recent study, this will cost US\$25 million – just enough to provide compensation payments for the 3,000 or so local fishermen, to develop more sustainable fishing practices and to re-train anyone who wants to work in other fields. It will be tough on the fishermen, of course, because all they really want to do is to feed their families. But that's what happens when you leave conservation action until desperation hits at the eleventh hour.

Goodness knows where the money will come from. The only possible hope is to find a commercial sponsor. It's too late to be picky – even if it means advertising logos emblazoned on the sides of every surviving vaquita.

All that remains of the Yangtze river dolphin are some hard lessons. But what will remain of the vaquita in a couple of years? More lessons? That would be inexcusable.

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