

## MY WAY OF THINKING

## MARK CARWARDINE

The broadcaster and campaigner airs his views on the world's rarest marine mammal - the vaquita - and invites your thoughts on efforts to save it.

After the extinction of the Yangtze river dolphin – the first cetacean to have been driven over the edge by human greed and incompetence – I was naïve to think that we might learn a few lessons.

Admittedly, the Yangtze River in China has been an environmental disaster zone for decades, but the dolphin's fate was ultimately sealed by an outrageous lack of funds, ineffective project management, and a lack of coordination and agreement between conservation groups, western scientists and Chinese authorities. There was so much faffing about that far too little was done, far too late.

This is one reason we're barely holding against the tide of environmental decline – a lack of what I call 'predictive conservation'. Time after time, we fail to take action until the extinction clock strikes five minutes to midnight. We stand by and watch endangered species slide down the slippery slope towards oblivion, and fail to act until their situation becomes so desperate that they've almost reached the point of no return.

The obvious explanation is a simple matter of economics: funds are severely limited, and there are too many other animals even closer to extinction that need our attention more urgently. But just how rapidly – and by how much – does a population have to decline before everyone is galvanised into action? This is a critical issue, because it costs much more to bring a species back from the brink if it's nearly there already, and the chances of success are much slimmer.

So it's hardly surprising that the

Yangtze river dolphin will not be the last cetacean to disappear. I hope I am wrong, but my guess is that the next to go will be the vaquita, a tiny porpoise clinging to survival in the extreme northern end of the Gulf of California, in western Mexico. Alarm bells have been ringing for decades: there were 885 left in 1988–89, 567 in 1997, 245 in 2008, and 59 in 2015. The latest estimate is fewer than 20. Now its outlook is very bleak indeed.

The reason is clear: vaquita drown in near-invisible gillnets, set for a two-metre-long fish called the totoaba. Critically endangered itself, the totoaba has a swim bladder (worth up to US\$20,000 on the black market) that is highly prized in Chinese traditional medicine. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to work out that the vaquita's only chance of survival was always to remove all these deadly gillnets from its range. If only: we

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could have saved two endangered species for the price of one.

A few dedicated souls did try to take action years ago, and have been fighting the vaquita's corner ever since. But they desperately needed the support of the Mexican Government – and international conservation groups – and their calls for help fell largely on deaf ears. It was the same old story. Do something, but only when the situation is desperate.

It wasn't until 2015 that a gillnet ban was introduced – and even that has been poorly enforced. I never thought I'd say this, but it's largely thanks to the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, in conjunction with the Mexican Navy, that there are any vaquita left at all. I'm not a big fan – I believe that most of Sea Shepherd's ill-conceived campaigns actually hinder conservation efforts – but, in this instance, it is doing magnificent work by systematically removing as many illegal gillnets as it possibly can.

It was International Save the Vaquita Day on 7 July 2018. Conservationists aren't giving up – even though, in their heart of hearts, they know it's almost certainly too late.

Meanwhile, local fishermen are simply biding their time until the vaquita goes extinct. Then they will be able to fish more freely, with fewer restrictions. I fear they will not have long to wait. 🐟

MARK CARWARDINE is a frustrated and frank conservationist.

**WHAT DO YOU THINK?** If you want to support Mark in his views or shoot him down in flames, email [wildlifeletters@immediate.co.uk](mailto:wildlifeletters@immediate.co.uk)



Too little, too late?  
The vaquita is clinging to survival in western Mexico.