

SPECIES ON THE BRINK

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A tiny, little-known porpoise could become the second cetacean driven to extinction by human activity

What is the vaquita?

It's a kind of porpoise. The word *vaquita* means 'little cow' in Spanish and reflects its gentle, docile nature. One of the smallest of all whales, dolphins and porpoises, it has a tall dorsal fin, a dark ring around each eye and blackish grey 'lips'. Very little is known about its life and habits – but we do know that it's the most critically endangered marine mammal in the world and is in imminent danger of extinction.

Where does it live?

Only in the shallow, murky waters of the extreme northern end of the Gulf of California, in western Mexico. It has always had the smallest range of any cetacean, but even that has shrunk in recent years to an area just 25 x 12km in size.

How many are left?

Experts have estimated that there was a stable population of 5,000 for hundreds of thousands of years. But the species has been in precipitous decline since it was first discovered, in 1958. There were 885 in 1988; 567 in 1997; 245 in 2008; 59 in 2015; 30 in 2016; and fewer than 20 in 2019. The most recent surveys, in 2025, confirmed sightings of between 7 and 10 survivors.

What is the problem?

The biggest threat is entanglement and accidental drowning in near-invisible gillnets, which hang vertically in the water like curtains. These are set by the local fishing community for species including sharks and blue shrimp, but the main concern has been those set illegally for a 2m-long sea bass-like fish called the totoaba. Endemic to the Upper Gulf of California, and also endangered, the totoaba is highly prized for its swim bladder, which is used in traditional Chinese medicine. It is trafficked overseas at prices rivalling cocaine and gold – up to \$80,000 (£59,000) per kg on the black market.

The mysterious vaquita clings on to survival in Mexico



Isn't it illegal to fish for totoaba?

Yes, it is. The Mexican government declared a permanent ban on totoaba fishing in 1975 and, under international pressure, banned the use of gillnets in the Upper Gulf in 2017. Meanwhile, national and international trade in totoaba is also illegal.

So why does it continue?

For three reasons. First, the promise of large profits has attracted organised criminal gangs – Mexican cartels trading with Chinese Triads. Second, the temptation for fishermen is intense: a night's poaching of totoaba can earn them a year's income, with little chance of being arrested. And, finally, there has been a lack of proper enforcement of the bans.

Is there any cause for hope?

The vaquita's population is terrifyingly low, but has been virtually stable for the past three years. The 7–10 survivors observed in 2025 included individuals that scientists hadn't seen for ages, suggesting there may be other areas harbouring more animals. Also, at least one calf was spotted, so they are still reproducing – another cause for hope.

What's being done to prevent extinction?

Conservation efforts have included setting up a vaquita refuge, developing alternative fishing gear, better law enforcement,

and compensation for the local fishing community for lost income. Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, in particular, has been retrieving illegal gillnets in the so-called Zero Tolerance Area – the heart of the vaquita's known range.


Are there any vaquitas in captivity?

No. But there was a last-ditch effort to buy time by capturing a few individuals, to look after until all the gillnets were removed. In 2017, two animals were caught: the youngster was released, since it appeared to be stressed; and the adult female died. It was utterly devastating and the plan was abandoned immediately.

What else can be done?

Our last hope is the elimination of gillnet fishing in the vaquita's habitat. But enforcement alone is not enough. While media attention has historically pinned fault at the fishing community's door, they are simply part of a much larger web of human faults, including Chinese demand, criminal gangs and even conservation groups commanding rather than cooperating. So, the issue needs to be tackled on many fronts.

Will the vaquita survive?

Probably not, without immediate and significant progress. It could become the second cetacean to be driven to extinction by human activity (after the Yangtze River dolphin, which disappeared in 2007). 

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