

## **The Society for Conservation Biology joins other major scientific societies to urge Mexico to take steps to save the critically endangered vaquita**

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The vaquita (*Phocoena sinus*) is the smallest cetacean species and arguably the most endangered marine mammal in the world. It inhabits the Gulf of California (Mexico), with a highly restricted distribution range of only 4000km<sup>2</sup>. The species was first described in 1958, included in the IUCN Red List [<http://www.iucn-csg.org/index.php/vaquita/>] as Vulnerable in 1978, upgraded to Endangered in 1990 and Critically Endangered in 1996. That same year the Mexican Ministry of Environment, Natural Resources and Fisheries created the International Committee for the Recovery of the Vaquita (CIRVA) to develop a recovery plan based on the best scientific evidence. It was then recognised, almost 20 years ago, that incidental mortality in gillnets constitutes the greatest threat to the survival of the species.

After years of neglect and increasing evidence of the decline (e.g., the 2010 CIRVA report – in [English](#) or [Spanish](#)), three international societies, wrote a joint letter to Mr E. Peña Nieto, the then newly-elected Mexican President, to express their concern over the future of vaquita on the 18<sup>th</sup> December 2012. These societies were the Society for Marine Mammalogy (SMM) and the European Cetacean Society (ECS), in addition to the Society for Conservation Biology (SCB).

The efforts made by the previous Government's Secretaría del Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (SEMARNAT) reduced the number of artisanal boats in the Biosphere Reserve of the Upper Gulf of California and Colorado River Delta by almost one third. However, these measures were insufficient as the use gillnets in the vaquita's distribution area continued, and thus only slowed the vaquita's decline toward extinction. Scientific studies re-affirmed that the only strategy that will ensure the vaquita's survival is to remove all gillnets from its range. With only about 200 vaquitas left then, the societies encouraged the Mexican Government to follow the 2012 recommendations made by CIRVA, as well as to require the use of alternative fishing gear instead of shrimp gillnets throughout the range of the vaquita and to assist the fishermen in making this transition. Finally, they also encouraged efforts to develop alternative gear for catching finfish.

Unfortunately, the Mexican Government has not taken the necessary steps to slow the decline, prompting more action by the Marine Section [[link to SCB Marine vaquita page](#)]. Recent studies estimate there are less than 100 vaquitas left, which are declining at a rate of 18.5% per year. In July 2014 CIRVA called for an immediate, complete ban on the use of gillnets within vaquita habitat. Despite these recommendations and the effort of many other national and international groups and individuals, gillnets continue to be used in vaquita's habitat. In fact, early this month 90 pangas (gillnet fishing boats) were [photographed](#) inside

the Refuge, within the vaquita habitat that is supposed to be protected. If the current mortality rate continues it will, inevitably, lead to the extinction of the species within the next years.

You can read the SCB Marine Section letter [here](#) in English or [Spanish](#). Visit the SCB Marine Save the Vaquita page [here](#).