



The Society for Marine Mammalogy

<http://www.marinemammalogy.org>

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Lic. Andrés Manuel López Obrador
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Dear President López Obrador,

As you are aware, the widely publicized near extinction of the vaquita because of illegal fishing in the Upper Gulf of California has stained Mexico's reputation as an environmentally responsible country. Over the past two months, it has become clear that enforcement is virtually non-existent even in the most critical areas for the few remaining vaquitas, no alternative livelihoods are being provided to the fishermen, and, as a consequence, gillnetting effort has resurged to the point where it is out of control, and if nothing changes, the vaquita is doomed.

In its report earlier this year, the Comité Internacional para la Recuperación de la Vaquita (CIRVA) stated that since 2011, the vaquita population had declined by 98%. CIRVA considered it likely that only 10 (range 6-22) individuals remained alive in 2018 (<http://www.iucn-csg.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/CIRVA-11-Final-Report-6-March.pdf>). The decline was entirely due to drowning in gillnets, most of them set illegally for totoaba, whose swim bladders are in great demand in mainland China and Hong Kong. Despite significant efforts by the scientific and conservation communities, and by the Mexican government, illegal fishing for totoaba and other species continues and vaquitas continue to die.

The few vaquitas that survive occupy a small portion of the species' range. CIRVA has urged that this small area (the Zero Tolerance Area or ZTA) be rigorously monitored and the gillnet ban strictly enforced there. Unfortunately, there is ample



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evidence that this was not done during either the last totoaba fishing season or the current shrimp and finfish season (<https://www.excelsior.com.mx/nacional/fotografian-a-vaquita-marina-cerca-de-una-embarcacion-en-su-area-de-refugio/1343551>). The resumption of gillnetting, which is illegal throughout the vaquita's range, is linked to the lack of adequate incentives for fishermen to test alternative gear. Both past governments and your government have fallen short in socializing available gears known *not* to entangle vaquitas and in developing new gears and livelihoods for the communities. Negotiating terms with local fishermen and getting them to either convert to alternative gear or supporting them with socioeconomic alternatives needs to happen quickly. But in the meantime, more immediate steps are needed to prevent the extinction of Mexico's largest endemic mammal. The tiny ZTA (approximately 24 x 12 km) needs to be clearly marked and patrolled to prevent gillnets from killing the last vaquitas. Inaction will certainly result in the vaquita's extinction, a tragedy that will be directly attributed to your administration's unwillingness to enforce the laws and regulations.

As President of the world's largest professional scientific society dedicated to the study of marine mammals, I make this plea on behalf of our entire membership.

Sincerely,

D. Ann Pabst
President, Society for Marine Mammalogy

Cc: Dr. Victor Villalobos Arambula – Secretario de Agricultura y Desarrollo Rural
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