



The Society for Marine Mammalogy

<http://www.marinemammalogy.org>

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13 March 2020

Lic. Andrés Manuel López Obrador
Presidente de la República
Puerta B Palacio Nacional
Plaza de la Constitución S/N
Colonia Centro
Ciudad de México 06066
México

Dear President López Obrador,

On 9 November 2019 I wrote, on behalf of the Society for Marine Mammalogy, to convey our deep concern about the need to protect the few surviving vaquitas. I am writing again, in response to a letter from Director General Gonzalez Azuara (received 26 November 2019), because the situation for the vaquita has deteriorated further.

We were distressed to see photographic evidence of yet another vaquita dead in a totoaba net (photo taken in early March 2020). The Mexican government's response to our letter of 9 November 2019 (both our letter and the response are attached) indicates that the areas protected for vaquitas are marked by buoys. This information is not in agreement with a recent net-removal update posted on the IUCN/SSC Cetacean Specialist Group (CSG) website ([vaquita update https://iucn-csg.org](https://iucn-csg.org)), which confirms that only four buoys are currently deployed and they mark the corners of the Zero Tolerance Area; no buoys mark the boundaries of the Vaquita Refuge. Moreover, the buoys marking the Zero Tolerance Area were installed by a private group, the Museo de Ballena, in cooperation with PROFEPA. The website update also illustrates the locations where illegal totoaba nets have been removed – 106 in total so far this season. Additionally, a report on the most recent vaquita field research (<https://iucn-csg.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/2020-Vaquita-Field-Report.pdf>), in September-October 2019, describes illegal fishing that was



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occurring before the current totoaba season (and the 2019-2020 net-removal effort) began.

The Mexican government's response letter to the Society's earlier letter of concern suggests that illegal activities should be reported to the Federal Attorney for Environmental Protection. However, we are not aware of any charges being laid despite the fact that government enforcement authorities are on-board the net-removal vessels and therefore they must know about the illegal activities (which are also summarized on the openly available CSG website). It is difficult to envisage how they could be made more visible to authorities.

March has traditionally been the peak month of illegal totoaba fishing. Already this month, at least one vaquita has been killed. Research in 2019 documented three new calves, all apparently healthy. We interpret this as evidence that vaquitas still have the potential to recover, but only if real protection is put in place immediately. Inaction will certainly result in the vaquita's extinction, a tragedy that will be linked directly to your administration's unwillingness to enforce your nation's laws.

On behalf of the Society for Marine Mammalogy, I ask your government to take immediate and decisive action to protect vaquitas as well as the brave and dedicated individuals who are putting their lives on the line to save this critically endangered species. The fates of the vaquitas and those working to protect them are in your hands.

Sincerely,

D. Ann Pabst
President, Society for Marine Mammalogy

Cc: Dr. Victor Villalobos Arambula – Secretario de Agricultura y Desarrollo Rural
Dr. Victor Manuel Toledo Manzur – Secretario de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales
Lic. Raúl Elenes – Comisionado Nacional de Acuicultura y Pesca
Almirante José Rafael Ojeda Durán, Secretario de Marina
Honorable Olga Sánchez Cordero, Secretaria de Gobernación
Ivonne Higuero – Secretary General CITES
Mechtild Rössler – Director of the UNESCO World Heritage Centre
Peter Shadie – Director of the IUCN World Heritage Programme
Jon Paul Rodriguez – Chair of the IUCN Species Survival Commission



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9 November 2019

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México

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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SEMARNAT
SECRETARÍA DE MEDIO AMBIENTE Y
RECURSOS NATURALES



CONANP
COMISIÓN NACIONAL
DE ÁREAS NATURALES
PROTEGIDAS

**COMISIÓN NACIONAL DE ÁREAS
NATURALES PROTEGIDAS**
DIRECCIÓN GENERAL DE
OPERACIÓN REGIONAL

Oficio Núm. F00-DGOR/1269 /2019
Ciudad de México, a 26 de noviembre de 2019

"2019, Año del Caudillo del Sur, Emiliano Zapata".

D. ANN PABST
PRESIDENTE DE LA SOCIEDAD DE MAMOLOGIA MARINA
Presente

Hago referencia a su comunicación dirigida al C. Presidente Lic. Andrés Manuel López Obrador, recibida en esta unidad administrativa el pasado 21 de noviembre del año en curso, mediante denuncia la existencia de actividades ilegales en la Zona de Tolerancia Cero y recomienda que ésta sea señalizada y resguardada para evitar el uso de redes de enmalle en esta zona.

Sobre el particular, comunico a usted que a través de la Procuraduría Federal de Protección al Ambiente se han instalado boyas para señalar la Zona de Tolerancia Cero, así como también para delimitar el Área de Refugio para la Protección de la Vaquita, ampliada mediante Acuerdo Secretarial publicado en el Diario Oficial de la Federación el 20 de abril de 2018.

Asimismo, agradeceré a usted que tanto las actividades ilícitas como la amplia evidencia que menciona en su escrito, sean denunciadas ante la Procuraduría Federal de Protección al Ambiente.

Aprovecho la ocasión para enviarle un cordial saludo.

Atentamente
EL DIRECTOR GENERAL

Ing. JOSÉ ANTONIO GONZALEZ AZUARA

C.c.p. Roberto Aviña Carlin. Comisionado Nacional de Áreas Naturales Protegidas. Presente
Dulce Ma. Ávila Martínez. Directora de Coordinación Intersectorial para la Conservación de Especies Marinas en Riesgo. Presente
Lorenzo Rojas Bracho. Director adscrito a la Dirección Regional Península de Baja California y Pacífico Norte.
Ana Luisa Figueroa Carranza. Directora Regional Noroeste y Alto Golfo de California. Presente
Martín Sau Cota. Encargado de la Dirección de la Reserva de la Biosfera Alto Golfo de California y Delta del Río Colorado. Presente

