

American Society of Mammalogists

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Sr. Vicente Fox Quezada,
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Dear President Fox Quezada:

The American Society of Mammalogists, founded in 1919, is the major professional organization of scientists who conduct research on wild mammals in the Americas, including Mexico. As President of the Society, I wish to commend the Government of Mexico for actions taken on behalf of the conservation of the vaquita (*Phocoena sinus*, a unique marine mammal) and its habitat within the waters of the Northern Gulf of California, including the Biosphere Reserve of the Upper Gulf of California and Delta of the Colorado River. I also encourage continued efforts on behalf of this species.

Mexico is the sole guardian of the vaquita, a porpoise that has one of the highest conservation priorities of any species of marine mammal in the world.. The entire species consists of the small population (fewer than 1,000 animals) that inhabits the northernmost part of the Gulf of California, including the Biosphere Reserve. It has been determined by internationally recognized scientists that without question the main threat to the vaquita's existence is bycatch (accidental capture) in gillnets. Current data, from a single port, indicate that the rate of mortality from entanglement in gillnets is estimated at 7 to 14 per cent each year. This bycatch is unsustainable because the maximum potential rate of natural increase for the vaquita is only 3-6 %, yet the studied population is declining, perhaps as fast as 8 % annually. If the species is to survive, the rate of entanglement must be reduced immediately and substantially; otherwise, the vaquita may reach an irreversible population level in the next few years. Immediate action has also been recommended by other international scientific organizations, including IUCN – The World Conservation Organization.

The vaquita has the smallest total range of any species of marine mammal. It's unique habitat in the northern Gulf of California is also home to many other endemic species that have been

seriously affected by over-fishing. It has been demonstrated that shrimp trawling, in particular, is detrimental to the environment. Trawlers destroy the seabed, change the structure of benthic (sea-bottom) communities, and reduce the diversity of life in marine waters. It follows that trawlers have no place in the Biosphere Reserve. For the vaquita to persist, for the ecological health of the northern Gulf, and for the long-term sustainability of fishing, all fisheries in the region will need to make some short-term sacrifices.

The American Society of Mammalogists recognizes and supports the actions of the Government of Mexico to reduce the number of trawlers in the Biosphere Reserve, as well as its efforts to ban large-mesh gillnets in vaquita habitat. Research has proven that keeping trawlers out of certain protected areas can help restore benthic communities, enhance fishery potential, and preserve biodiversity. Science has also clearly demonstrated that the vaquita population cannot withstand current levels of incidental mortality from entanglement in gillnets. The American Society of Mammalogists supports step-wise banning of gillnets from the Biosphere Reserve. We also support efforts aimed at providing alternative fishing and other economic opportunities to people living in the Biosphere Reserve and dependent on its resources.

The unfortunate reduction in tourism following recent actions by trawler fishermen to block the road between Puerto Peñasco and the United States is contrary to the best interests of both the local people and the vaquita. It is important to counter, in the strongest possible terms, any claim that the vaquita's well being is incompatible with a healthy and prosperous future for human communities of the upper Gulf. A productive ecosystem is key to the well-being of people, porpoises, and all other forms of life that must share the region's resources.

On behalf of the American Society of Mammalogists, I commend the Government of Mexico for taking the first steps of banning shrimp trawls and large-mesh gillnets in the Biosphere Reserve and throughout the range of the vaquita. I encourage your continued diligence in conservation efforts, both on behalf of the vaquita and its habitat in the Upper Gulf of California, and in conjunction with measures that will provide a secure and promising future for the human population.

Sincerely,



Bruce D. Patterson

President

American Society of Mammalogists

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