

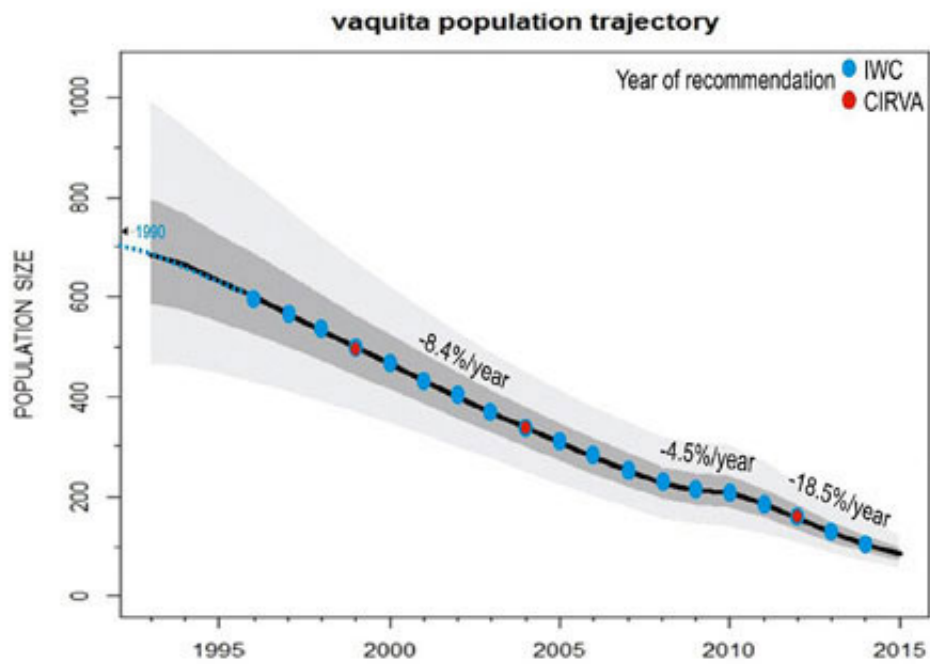
《Save the vaquita by stopping illegal trade of totoaba》

Vaquita, the world's smallest species of porpoise, is considered to be the rarest and most-endangered species of marine mammals on earth with less than 30 of them still alive. It has been listed as Critically Endangered animal by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).



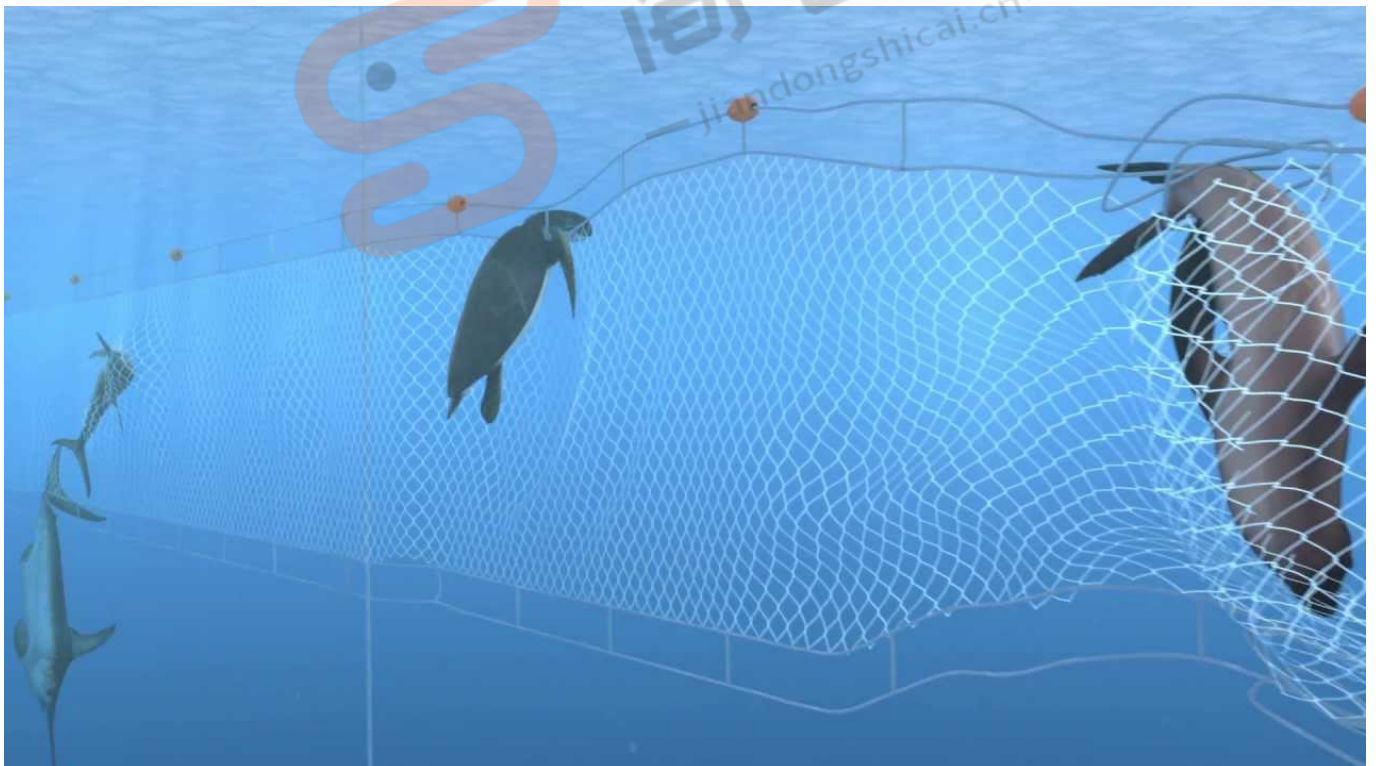
vaquita (Photo/ Internet)

Vaquitas are found in a tiny area in the extreme northern Gulf of California, in Baja California, Mexico. Its fate is tied to the upper Gulf of California ecosystem. It is believed the species will soon face extinction unless drastic action is taken.



(Picture/ VIVA vaquita)

Vaquitas have never been hunted directly, but why is their population declining? The reason lies in gillnets.



Gillnet (Photo/ Internet)

The gillnets are nearly invisible and set to catch fish and shrimps, especially the totoaba, the similarly sized

endemic drum that is also critically endangered. The dried swim bladder of the totoaba comes in high-demand in the Chinese market. They are considered as delicacy and health tonic, as well as a type of investment for many Chinese. According to a recent Greenpeace East Asia report, traders in Hong Kong admitted to selling larger bladders for HK\$ 1 million (US\$130,000) in 2011 and 2012. Since the vaquita and totoaba often appear in same area, many vaquitas are killed from illegal gillnet fishing the totoaba.



Dried totoaba swim bladders (Photo/ Internet)

Accordingly, to save vaquitas, both Mexico and China should redouble efforts to halt illegal fishing.

The Mexican government has already invested thousands of dollars to eliminate the by-catch. In May 2015, a partial gillnet ban was put into effect.

On, June 7, 2017, Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto, along with Hollywood actor Leonardo DiCaprio and Mexican telecoms billionaire Carlos Slim, signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to protect Vaquitas. Under the deal, a permanent ban on gillnets in the vaquita's habitat will be imposed. Mexico pledged to develop new fishing gear for locals. Peña Nieto said Mexico "understands its responsibility as one of the most bio-diverse countries in the world" and would make a "historic effort" to protect vaquita.



Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto (left) and Leonardo DiCaprio (right) agree to increase efforts to save the vaquita marina porpoise. Screenshot from Twitter/epn

But to halt the by-catch, illegal trade of totoaba must be banned. Reportedly, there is a frequent trafficking route for totoaba swim bladders that hails from Mexico, sometimes goes through the United States and then to China.

In September, 2015, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service organized trilateral meetings of China, U.S. and Mexico on the illegal trade in totoaba to address trafficking concerns.

China, Mexico and the United States agreed at the 17th Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) held in October 10, 2016, to collaboratively combat the illegal Totoaba trade.

And on December 1, a training workshop was held in Guangzhou, capital city of Guangdong Province, where about 100 enforcement officers from fisheries, market control, customs, and coast guard in Guangdong province were in attendance to learn the conservation status of Totoaba and Vaquita and to identify Totoaba maw.

Furthermore, China's law on the wildlife protection came into effect on January, 2017. Meanwhile for the first time, Beijing had taken actions to tackle illegal totoaba trade by inspecting seafood shops in Guangzhou where China's biggest seafood market resides.



Law enforcement authorities are inspecting seafood shops in Guangzhou, China (Photo/ Chinanews.com)

Nonetheless, more should be done in China. Public education programs should be set up. Public awareness campaigns have a huge impact on Chinese attitudes. According to a report by Wild Aid, sales of shark fin in Guangzhou, the center of shark fin trade in the country, have dropped by 82% due to China government's austerity efforts and celebrities-supported campaigns.

Similarly, a better understanding on the conservation of vaquita and totoaba should be promoted to the public in order to stop illegal trade of totoaba and to save the vaquita.