

## **NGO Statement on Vaquita at the 65<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the International Whaling Commission**

The below signed NGOs express their deep concern regarding the critically endangered vaquita.

The vaquita (*Phocoena sinus*) could be extinct by 2018 unless all gillnets are eliminated from its range and the illegal fishery and trade of totoaba are ended. The vaquita has the most limited geographic range of any marine cetacean (whale, dolphin or porpoise); the entire species inhabits the northernmost Gulf of California. It is the smallest – and the most endangered – cetacean species in the world.

The fifth report of the International Committee for the Recovery of the Vaquita (CIRVA-5), which was published in July 2014, concluded that fewer than 100 vaquita remain, that no more than 25 are likely to be reproductively mature females, and that the vaquita **could be extinct by 2018** if fishery by-catch is not eliminated immediately.<sup>1</sup>

It has long been known that the main cause of the vaquita's decline is accidental capture in gillnets. However the vaquita's decline has been accelerating in recent years. In 2012, CIRVA had estimated that about 200 vaquitas remained. Since then, about half of these are thought to have died in gillnets, leaving fewer than 100 individuals now.

We commend the Government of Mexico for its important efforts and substantial investment of resources to conserve the vaquita, including the creation of CIRVA more than 15 years ago, establishment of a Biosphere Reserve in the upper portion of the Gulf of California in 1993 and declaration of a Vaquita Refuge in 2005. Most recently, the government approved an Official Norm mandating the progressive substitution in three years of shrimp drift gillnet with vaquita-free shrimp trawl nets to allow local communities to continue fishing.

However it is abundantly clear that much more needs to be done. Immediate action must be taken if Mexico is to prevent the extinction of the country's only endemic cetacean.

At-sea enforcement efforts have failed and illegal fishing has massively increased in the last three years throughout the range of the vaquita. Of particular concern is the highly lucrative and illegal fishery for the totoaba (*Totoaba macdonaldi*), another critically endangered species endemic to the Gulf of California. Although Mexico banned all totoaba fishing in 1975, illegal fishing and illegal exports to China, including through the United States, have soared in recent years as demand in China for totoaba swim-bladders has increased.

In light of the catastrophic decrease in the vaquita population over the last three years, it is imperative that *all* gillnet fishing be eliminated throughout the entire range of the species.

Consistent with CIRVA-5's findings and recommendations and the advice of the Scientific Committee of the International Whaling Commission (IWC), we urge the Government of Mexico to take immediate action to establish a gillnet exclusion zone which covers the **full range of the vaquita**, not simply the existing refuge. This will only succeed if sufficient resources are available for enforcement.

In the next few days, the Mexican Government will announce its response to the CIRVA-5 recommendations and to the advice given to President Enrique Peña Nieto by the Advisory Commission to the Presidency of Mexico for Recovery of the Vaquita. We appeal to all IWC contracting governments to offer assistance to the Government of Mexico to ensure that immediate and decisive action is taken to prevent the extinction of the vaquita. In particular we urge the US and China to coordinate with Mexico to enforce the ban on international trade in totoaba.

In 2006 the world lost the Yangtze river dolphin or baiji – the first human-caused extinction of a cetacean species. Now, less than ten years later, we are facing the imminent extinction of the vaquita. The IWC and all contracting governments have a responsibility to do their utmost to prevent this from happening.

- American Cetacean Society
- Animal Welfare Institute (AWI)
- PRETOMA (Costa Rica)
- Aso. Ambiental VIDA (Costa Rica)
- Augusto Carneiro Institute (Brazil)
- Australian Marine Conservation Society
- Blue Voice
- Campaign Whale
- Centro de Conservación Cetacea
- Centro Ecocéanos (Chile)
- CEBSE (Dominican Republic)
- Cetacean Society International
- Conservación de Mamíferos Marinos México
- Defenders of Wildlife
- Dolphin Connection
- Eastern Caribbean Coalition for Environmental Awareness (ECCEA)
- Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA)
- Equilibrio Azul (Ecuador)
- Fundación Ballena Azul (Peru)
- Fundación Ballenas del Pacífico (Ecuador)
- Fundación Cethus
- Fundación Conservaré (Colombia)
- Fundación EQUINO (Colombia)
- Fundación Keto
- Fundación Patagonia Natural (Argentina)
- Fundación Promar (Costa Rica)
- Fundación La Tortuga (Venezuela)
- Fundación Vida Sin Fronteras (Ecuador)
- Fundación Vidanimal Cali (Colombia)
- Green Heritage Fund Suriname
- Greenpeace
- Humane Society International
- Instituto Baleia Jubarte (Brazil)
- Instituto de Conservación de Ballenas (Argentina)
- International Fund for Animal Welfare
- International Marine Mammal Project of Earth Island Institute
- Iruka and Kujira Action Network
- IegaSeas International
- Morigenos (Slovenian Marine Mammal Society)
- NABU International
- OceanCare
- Orca Peru
- Org. Conservación Cetáceos (OCC) (Uruguay)
- Producciones Serengeti
- Pro Wildlife
- Serengeti de México
- Society for the Conservation of Marine Mammals
- Whale and Dolphin Conservation
- Whaleman Foundation
- Whales Alive
- World Animal Protection
- WWF

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<sup>i</sup> 2014. Report of the Fifth Meeting of the Comité Internacional para la Recuperación de la Vaquita (CIRVA-5). Available at <http://vaquita.tv/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Report-of-the-Fifth-Meeting-of-CIRVA.pdf>