Long Live the Vaquita (and the Upper Gulf of California)!

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Our planet is in the midst of the sixth and greatest extinction event ever known, this one caused by humans. One species that is on the verge of disappearing is the vaquita – a small porpoise found only in the upper Gulf of California, Mexico off the Baja California peninsula. With only an estimated 50 to 100 vaquitas remaining, scientists are calling it the most endangered marine mammal *in the world*.

The main threat to the vaquita is accidentally being caught in the many miles of gillnets set for fish and shrimp. There are approximately 100,000 people living in communities in the upper Gulf whose lives depend on fishing, even though part of the area has been designated as a vaquita refuge and a Biosphere reserve. Small-scale fishers in towns such as San Felipe and El Golfo de Santa Clara devote their lives to becoming experts at catching large quantities of fin-fish and shrimp. Where does that fish go once it’s caught? Mexico sells most of their seafood to the United States. That fish you ate for dinner the other night? Yes, think of the vaquita… Additionally, some fishers from outside communities illegally set nets (which also trap vaquita) to catch the endangered totoaba (or Mexican seabass), the bladder of which sells for many thousands of dollars in Asian communities.

Is there still hope for the vaquita? The answer is yes, for a few different reasons. That fish you ate for dinner last night could have *instead* come from emerging, sustainable fishing practices that do not harm vaquitas and allow fishers to still make a living. You can help by looking for “vaquita-safe” seafood in the near future and by asking your local seafood store and restaurant to understand where their products come from and only purchase vaquita-safe. The Mexican government has recently instituted a gillnet ban in the Upper Gulf and enforcement of this and other laws protecting the ecosystem will be vital. And many organizations are also working on the ground in Mexico in the local communities, with schoolteachers and their students, and fishers and business owners, all of whom will be the ultimate determinants of whether this species survives.

These communities depend on the bounty of this incredible ocean ecosystem, which in turn is linked to the survival of the enigmatic and irreplaceable vaquita; but they are in trouble and they need your help! Please join us for International Save the Vaquita Day on July 11th, 2015. Visit [www.vivavaquita.org](http://www.vivavaquita.org) for more information and how you can get involved.