
Vaquita Fact Sheet

Phocoena sinus



The Vaquita is the world's most endangered cetacean (a group of animals which includes all whales, dolphins and porpoises). This animal looks similar to the harbor porpoise (*Phocoena phocoena*) but is considerably smaller. Adult vaquita measure no more than 5 feet (1.5 m) in length. The body is predominately gray but fades to white closer to the tail.



Adult vaquita
with calf

Dark rings encircle the eyes and dark patches are found on the sides of the mouth. The head is rounded with a small, almost indistinguishable beak.

Unlike most cetaceans, vaquitas live in small family units which usually include a mother and her offspring. They do not form large pods like other cetaceans although these small groups will work cooperatively to hunt fish, crustaceans, squid and octopus. They become sexually mature between 3 and 6 years of age and females will typically produce a single calf every year. Little is known about the life expectancy of the Vaquita, however the oldest known was estimated at 21 years.

Their Spanish name translates to "little cow." They are also known as cochito, desert porpoise, or the Gulf of California harbor porpoise.

Range and Habitat

The vaquita has an extremely limited range, occurring only in the northern end of the Gulf of California (Mexico). They frequently forage in bays and lagoons, which often puts them into close contact with various human-related hazards such as boats and fishing nets. It is believed that their historical range once extended south along the Mexican coastline to the Tres Marias Islands and Banderas Bay.

Conservation Status

This small cetacean was discovered in the 1950s. In recent years, due to its classification as one of the most critically endangered species in the world, it has become better known. Although vaquitas were never intentionally harvested by people, they are frequently

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accidental bycatch of the fishing industry. Combined with their already limited population, low birth rate and poor genetic diversity, the porpoises' numbers have dropped precipitously over the last few decades.

In part to protect the species, the Mexican government established the Upper Gulf of California Biosphere Reserve in 1993. This protected area, combined with better enforcement of existing laws and new fishing gear which helped prevent entanglement, led to some short-lived progress on the vaquita's recovery. In recent years, an emerging black market for another endangered species, a fish called the totoaba (*Totoaba macdonaldi*), has presented new challenges to the vaquita. Because the two species often swim in the same areas, the vaquita is once more being caught by illegal gill nets. As of late 2016, it was estimated that only 30 individuals remain and, without major intervention, the species will likely be declared extinct in the next few years. The totoaba was declared critically endangered in 2010.

Learn more about the vaquita on the Oceanscape Network at oceanscape.aquarium.org.