

Saving the *Vaquita* with Buy-outs and Buy-in

Presented at: A Private Sector Approach – Conservation Agreements in Support of Marine Protection



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Abstract

- A joint TNC/WWF Gulf of California team is exploring several options for private marine and coastal conservation to complement and augment existing protection strategies.
- Those include coastal zone concessions, coastal land, kelp concessions, water rights acquisitions, incentive-based fisheries management tools, and fishing buy-outs.
- This case study will highlight the *vaquita* initiative, which is a collaborative effort by several government agencies and non-governmental organizations.
- A public-private buyout effort, the leasing of gillnets, and gear swaps are being used in a strategy to protect the *vaquita* from extinction.

Project Context

The *vaquita* is in trouble...

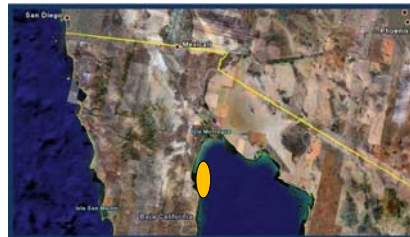
- The *vaquita* (*Phocoena sinus*), the smallest cetacean in the world, is endemic to Mexican waters; its highly restricted present distribution is in the northern Gulf of California.
- Present abundance is about 150 individuals.
- IUCN and CITES place the *vaquita* in their most critically endangered categories. The Mexican government and the U.S. Endangered Species Act also list the *vaquita* as endangered.
- Gillnet by-catch is the primary threat; an average of 50 per year have been killed by entanglement in the last 15 years.



Gillnet Removal Options

Saving the *vaquita* requires removal of gillnets of all mesh sizes. Strategies to compensate fishermen for removing gillnets include:

- A permanent buy-out – purchasing gear, boats and permits from fishermen who stop using gillnets.
- A temporary rent-out – renting gear, boats and permits to reduce mortality now while permanent options are explored.
- A swap-out – swapping non-entangling gear (e.g., traps, *suriperas*) for gillnets.



Northern Gulf of California with approximate *vaquita* distribution



Vaquita are not often seen at the surface.

Issues

1. The Upper Gulf of California has a long history of conflict between fishermen, regulators and conservationists.
2. The several different Mexican government agencies responsible for fisheries management, conservation and enforcement have histories of limited cooperation and very different institutional mandates and incentives.
3. No precedent or mechanism exists in Mexico for a conservation-driven artisanal fisheries buy-out.
4. Weak and ineffective enforcement capacity, will, and historical tolerance of extensive illegal fishing.
5. Building a collaborative, non-competitive NGO coalition to support the effort.
6. Raising an unbudgeted US\$100 million in difficult economic times.
7. Mobilizing broad international public and private concern without undermining Mexican government leadership on the issue.



Vaquita by-catch

Conclusions

Urgency: We have to significantly reduce mortality *immediately* or the *vaquita* will go extinct. The perfect may be the enemy of success; the right solutions may be messy.

Enforcement is key: Success depends upon effective enforcement. Without ways to keep retired nets out of the water and new fishing effort from leaking back in, the buy-out efforts will be wasted.

Social solutions are indispensable: Gillnet elimination without meaningful compensation and/or transitions to alternative livelihoods is politically infeasible.

Durable management solutions must follow short-term fixes: The political will to create and enforce a permanent ban on gillnets is the key to making this investment last and saving the *vaquita*.

Buy-outs require buy-in: Mexican government leaders - from the presidency to local agents - have to buy in to the plan and work hard to implement it. International actors have to play more intelligent, nuanced and less visible supporting roles.



Illustration of two *vaquitas*: something you may never see because they're so elusive



More *vaquita* by-catch

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