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Captive breeding is a final roll of the dice for the vaquita

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By **Olive Heffernan**



Vaquitas are in serious danger from threats such as gill nets
Flip Nicklin/Minden Pictures/Alamy

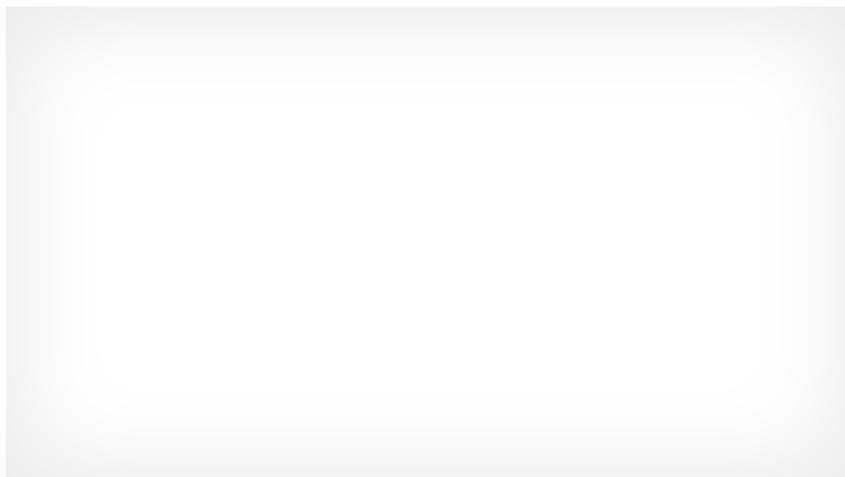
Yet another vaquita has turned up dead in recent weeks, making one less of the small, smiley-faced porpoise that is the world's most endangered cetacean

Estimated to number [as few as 30](#) earlier this year, this endearing species has become a poster child for conservation – not least because its decline has been obvious for decades, yet all attempts to save it so far have failed.

In a last-ditch attempt to avoid extinction, scientists are now preparing to capture some of the remaining vaquitas and breed them in captivity. This high-risk move may appear extreme, but further losses are reinforcing the need for urgent action: another four have washed up dead so far this year, after getting entangled in fishing nets.

The continued toll seems astonishing given that the vaquita's home in the upper Gulf of California, just off north-west Mexico, has been protected as a [UNESCO biosphere reserve since 1993](#), when there were around 600 of the mammals left. Despite that, the area continues to be plundered by both legal and illegal fishing.

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The biggest problem is poachers using gill nets, which are particularly dangerous for vaquitas. The poachers illegally fish in the reserve for totoaba, a large endangered species whose swim bladder is known as “aquatic cocaine” – fetching tens of thousands of dollars in China for its purported, though unproven, health benefits.

But Mexican officials have consistently ignored scientific advice to permanently prohibit all gill nets in the porpoise's home waters. Instead, they have opted for short-term measures, such as a [two-year emergency ban on their use](#) that ends this month.

These efforts, along with the wider conservation campaign, backed by the likes of [Miley Cyrus](#) and [Leonardo DiCaprio](#), have not nearly been enough.

Breeding plan

With the species on the brink, the captive breeding plan is on the cusp of being put into action. Acoustic monitoring this summer will allow new estimates of numbers by the end of August. Then in October, a \$4 million effort will begin to track and herd survivors into a holding area with the help of dolphins trained by the US navy. Once they are deemed to be coping well, these animals will be taken to a sanctuary in San Felipe, Mexico, about 8 kilometres from their home.

Advocates of this plan point to the skies near San Felipe, where [California condors](#) soar, as evidence that this approach works. Through human activity, this species was reduced to just 27 individuals in 1987, at which point all wild birds were placed in captivity. There are now 270 back in the wild.

But equally, endangered marine species such as the [northern elephant seal](#) have been saved from extinction without the need for captive breeding. In each of these cases, success has hinged on removing the activity that threatened the species' survival in the first place.

There's no doubt that captive breeding will be risky. Assuming there are enough remaining vaquitas to be caught, no one knows how they will respond to being rounded up, transported and kept in captivity, simply because no one has tried it before.

And even if this successfully boosts the population, there is still the unanswered question of what happens next. Will these affable mammals be returned to a precarious existence in heavily poached waters? Unless the type of exploitation that has

caused the vaquita's demise is dealt with, the reality is that this – and many other species – will be lost from the wild forever.

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