

Extinction alert issued over critically endangered vaquita

World's tiniest marine mammal – found only in the Gulf of California in Mexico – has only 10 individuals left, study finds

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The vaquita porpoise has been driven to the edge of extinction due to entanglement in fishing nets known as ‘gillnets’. Photograph: Paula Olson/AP

The International Whaling Commission has issued the first “extinction alert” in its 70-year history, to warn of the danger facing the vaquita, the world’s tiniest and most critically endangered marine mammal.

A recent study shows that the small porpoise, found only in the Gulf of California in Mexico, has only 10 individuals left. It has been driven to the edge of extinction due to entanglement in fishing nets known as “gillnets”, **which are now illegal in the area.**

The scientific committee of the IWC said in a statement it had grave concerns over the survival of the vaquita and had issued the alert to highlight the actions needed to save it. It said extinction of the porpoise was inevitable unless all gillnets were replaced with alternative fishing gear that protected it and the livelihoods of fishers.

“If this doesn’t happen now, it will be too late,” it said.

Dr Lindsay Porter, the vice-chair of the IWC’s scientific committee said: “We wanted, with the extinction alert, to send the message to a wider audience and for everyone to understand how serious this is.”

The porpoises, which measure about 1.2-1.5 metres, become entangled and die in gillnets, which are flat fishing nets suspended vertically in the water. These nets are used by poachers to hunt the **totoaba**, an endangered fish prized for its swim bladder in Chinese medicine and sold at vast profits on the black market in China and Hong Kong. During the rise in the totoaba trade, the vaquita’s population has **plummeted from 567 to 10 over the last decade**.

In 2022, the Mexican navy, in collaboration with government agencies, placed concrete blocks in an area known as the zero tolerance area, and increased enforcement to deter illegal gillnet fishing and protect the vaquita. There is some evidence illegal fishing has moved to the edge of the zone, creating new problem areas.

The committee, made up of 200 leading scientists, said the effect of the deterrent structures looked promising but needed monitoring. The involvement of organised crime in the totoaba fishery and problems with enforcing fishing regulations at sea made it difficult to address, it said.

On a more positive note, Porter said the species was not yet doomed, noting that at least one baby vaquita had been spotted in the last year, a sign that the individuals are healthy.

“There is at least one brand new baby vaquita” said Porter. “They haven’t stopped breeding. If we can take away this one pressure, the population may recover. We can’t stop now.”

Bycatch – or unintended catch of non-target species – is estimated to kill 300,000 whales, dolphins and porpoises every year.