



GOLFO DE SANTA CLARA JOURNAL

Vaquita Porpoise, and a Way of Life, Face Extinction



Ann Johansson for The New York Times

Fishermen in Golfo de Santa Clara say their catches of shrimp and fish have steadily declined over the years.

By JAMES C. MCKINLEY JR.
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GOLFO DE SANTA CLARA, Mexico — The fishermen gathered in the early evening light where the desert meets the blue gulf to talk over the way they had always lived off the sea and the fate of a small, endangered porpoise few of them had ever seen.



The New York Times

The Mexican government set up a reserve in 1993 to protect the vaquita porpoises, which become entangled in fishing nets and drown. But the area is too small, with fishing banned in only about 637 square miles.

Environmentalists from the United States and Mexico had begged the fishermen to stop using the gill nets that are killing off La Vaquita, or the little cow, a porpoise that now has the dubious distinction of being one of the most endangered marine mammals in the world.

Only about 400 of them survive in the waters at the tip of the Gulf of California where the Colorado River once poured into the sea, environmentalists say, and the only way to save them is to ban commercial fishing with nets in about 1,545 square miles to a line cutting across the gulf about 70 miles south of the mouth of the river.

Environmentalists have put forward proposals to pay the fishermen not to fish and to develop tourism as an alternative source of income. But the men with rope-hardened hands and weathered faces are skeptical.

The desert here is a vast expanse of beige dunes and craggy rocks that bears nothing but

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scrub. The sea has always been the only source of food and money.

“They want us to stop fishing,” said Andrés González, a 43-year-old fisherman. “They want to take care of the animals here, but they are not taking care of the people.”

José Luis Carillo, 51, a longtime fisherman, allowed as how he might be willing to try his hand at running a restaurant or hotel, but it would be hard. For four decades he has known nothing but a fisherman’s life.

“There is nothing else to do here except fish,” he said, squinting at the gulf, the desert landscape, the fishing boats along the shore, their flags fluttering. “There are no factories. There are no other alternatives.”

Scientists trying to save the vaquita from extinction say they have run out of alternatives as well. The Mexican government set up a reserve in 1993 to protect the porpoises, which become entangled in fishing nets and drown. But it is too small, with fishing banned in only about 637 square miles.

Animals roam outside the protected area and their numbers continue to decline, biologists say. The year the reserve was created, for example, gill nets set for fish and shrimp killed about 39 vaquitas in just one of the three main fishing ports in the upper gulf, researchers say.

“There is a high risk that the species will disappear in a few years,” Omar Vidal, a biologist and the director of the World Wildlife Fund in Mexico, said. “We have to act immediately.”

Some scientists and not a few fishermen speculate that the decline of the porpoise might be linked to the damming and diversion of the Colorado River in the United States. The river once pumped tons of nutrients and fresh water into the porpoise’s habitat, providing food for the bottom of a rich food chain.

Fishermen say their catches of shrimp and several species of fish have steadily declined over the years as the river dwindled from a roaring flow of fresh water to a trickle of runoff from farms upstream.

“If you are going to turn off a river — 15 million acre-feet of water a year — and alter this habitat, I would be very surprised if it doesn’t have an affect on the vaquita,” said Karl W. Flessa, a geologist at the [University of Arizona](#) in Tucson.

But biologists say studies of the carcasses of the vaquita porpoises show no signs of malnourishment, but plenty of scars from fishing nets.

The advocates of buying out the fishermen note that the human population at the gulf’s tip is quite small, about 50,000 people in three towns, including maybe 10,000 fishermen.

The solution, they say, is to ban fishing with nets in the upper gulf and establish a \$50 million trust fund and use the earnings to pay fishermen a total of about \$4 million a year, not to fish but to pursue other trades. The program would last at least seven years, until the porpoise population could recover.

Mr. Vidal, of the World Wildlife Fund, said Mexican environmental and fishery officials have expressed interest in the idea. It also has the support of National Resource Defense Council, Conservation International and Pronatura in Mexico.

The buyout is a last resort. Lorenzo Rojas, a biologist with the National Ecology Institute who studies the vaquita, said his surveys had shown that the porpoise population is so

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thin that if more than one died each year in fishing nets the species would be doomed. Each female porpoise has only one calf every two years.

“The advantage of the buyout is it could buy time,” Mr. Rojas said. “We don’t want to save the vaquita and drive fishing families to hunger.”

In Santa Clara, some people already have turned to tourism to make a living. The town has a few small hotels and restaurants and a large park on the shore for recreational vehicles from the United States. Tourists rent four-wheel motorbikes and tear up and down the dunes. One fishing cooperative is trying to start a business to rent jet skis and motorcycles.

But the mainstay of the town’s economy is still fish, which, Mr. Vidal and other biologists note, have in any case been declining with the vaquita for years. Whether the declines stem from overfishing or the damming of the Colorado River or both, the fishermen will have to find other employment eventually, environmentalists argue. Why not now?

Indeed, some fishermen have noted that they are already having a harder time making a profit, and say they would welcome another way to make a living. But it would be hard to change a way of life that has lasted generations, and renting motor scooters to Americans or running dance halls is simply not in their blood, many fishermen here say.

“What will happen?” said Antonio Villegas, whose six brothers and four sons fish for a living. “What worries me is what are we all going to do? We live off fish. We want to keep fishing. We don’t know anything else.”

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