

Illegal fishing of Totoaba unleashed, with commercial sanctions

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Illegal Totoaba fishing is unleashed in the Gulf of Santa Clara, Sonora and San Felipe, Baja California, 24 hours after the commercial sanctions against Mexico ordered by CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Fauna and Flora), considering the new action plan for the protection of the vaquita porpoise as "Not Adequate".

Sources consulted by Excelsior revealed that for six days, around 200 small boats (pangas), without registration or permits, have been casting nets in the Upper Gulf of California, in search of the species known as "sea cocaine", since a kilogram of swim bladder of Totoaba fish reaches prices of up to one million pesos on the black market in China.

Poachers using gillnets with a mesh size of 10 to 14 inches mix with the members of cooperatives and federations that are currently catching olive curvina per season.

The run or reproductive season of the Totoaba fish (*Totoaba macdonaldi*) is recorded from March to June, which is when the females (who have the largest crop) come to the shore to spawn.

The irrefutable proof that the Totoaba hunt is underway is that Totoaba corpses have already begun to appear on the beaches, dragged by the currents, which, without their swim bladder, are thrown into the sea by poachers, in order to try to erase evidence and not attract attention when returning to land.

Illegal activities take place within the Vaquita Marina Refuge Area (13,000 km²), with the exception of the so-called Zero Tolerance Zone (228 km²), where the Secretary of the Navy (Semar) placed a concrete block wall with steel hooks to snag the forbidden nets.

At that site, where historically there are more sightings of the world's most endangered marine mammal the vaquita, the Sea Shepherd ship *Seahorse* also reports any pangas incursions and the presence of poachers.

According to peer-reviewed scientific research, the vaquita drowns when entangled in the gillnets used to capture the Totoaba fish, as confirmed in a video posted on social media in March 2020, where fishermen try to free the carcass of one of the last specimens of this endangered species.

As revealed by this newspaper, as of Monday, March 27, the "immediate suspension of all trade in species under the CITES annexes comes into force, by virtue of the fact that the Action Plan presented by Mexico before the date limit was evaluated as not adequate".

This is the first time that our country has faced trade sanctions from CITES, since 1991 when it adhered to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora.

In this way, Mexico joins countries such as Afghanistan, Djibouti, Grenada, Somalia, Sao Tome and Principe, Libya and Liberia, which have suspended their international trade transactions.

With this embargo, Mexico will have a million-dollar impact by not being able to export protected species, products and by-products of flora and fauna regulated by Appendix II and Appendix III of CITES.

According to the National Commission for the Knowledge and Use of Biodiversity (Conabio), Mexico has 2994 species registered in Appendix II, (two thousand 436 plants and 558 animals), which are not necessarily in danger of extinction, "But whose trade must be controlled to prevent this from happening. It also includes species that need to be regulated because of their similarity to others. International trade is allowed but under certain requirements."

In Appendix III, our country has 20 species of fauna, which includes populations for which support is requested from other countries in their protection.

International trade is allowed but regulated in the country concerned.

Entire groups such as primates, cetaceans (whales, dolphins, and porpoises), sea turtles, parrots, corals, cacti, and orchids are sometimes included. In other cases, only a subspecies or geographically isolated population of a species is included."

The CITES regulation applies to whole animals or plants, alive or dead; their parts, such as bones, skeletons, shells, antlers, teeth, skin, feathers, eggs, meat, wood, flowers, seeds, roots or their derivatives, such as furniture, sculptures, musical instruments and clocks made of ivory (or with parts or inlays); leather goods, medicines, essences and perfumes.

The top 2022 exports of live Mexican species regulated by CITES include the fire-kneed tarantula, rust-legged tarantula, red-ringed tarantula, Veracruz tarantula, and Guerrero tarantula.

In the case of flora we find mahogany wood and the candelilla plant, used for cosmetics, drugs, lubricants, plastics, textiles, inks, paints, polishes, adhesives or anticorrosives.

Among the most commercialized animal species in the world market are bighorn sheep trophies, moreleti crocodile skin, shark fins and seahorses, among many others.