



Cetacean Specialist Group

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To: CITES Secretary-General Ivonne Higuero

29 January 2025

Dear Secretary-General Higuero and staff,

We write at this time to follow up on the process that CITES began in 2023 to ensure that Mexico is meeting its commitments under the Convention with regard to the totoaba and vaquita, and to encourage collaboration with Mexico's new administration to improve conservation effectiveness in the Upper Gulf of California.

We congratulate President Claudia Sheinbaum Pardo and her new administration. We also welcome the recent appointments to lead key institutions, including the Secretariat of Environment and Natural Resources, the National Commission of Fisheries and Aquaculture, the Mexican Institute of Fisheries and Aquaculture Research, the National Commission of Natural Protected Areas and the Secretariat of the Navy. These bodies play pivotal roles in implementing actions for sustainable fishing and biodiversity protection in the Upper Gulf of California, particularly for the critically endangered vaquita (*Phocoena sinus*).

We are encouraged that, for the first time in 30 years, a federal administration has begun its term by prioritizing the complex issues facing cetaceans and other marine wildlife in the Upper Gulf. Successive administrations have taken years to develop plans intended to address vaquita conservation, but these efforts have not resulted in the implementation of key actions necessary to halt population decline. Twenty years of delayed action, or inaction, by previous administrations has allowed the vaquita population to decline to its present state of near extinction. We value the apparently proactive approach taken by the new administration and expect it to have meaningful, lasting conservation and sustainable development outcomes.

We also applaud the Mexican Navy's recent expansion of areas where anti-gillnet devices are deployed as this approach appears to have slowed the vaquita's slide toward extinction. The diligent work of researchers who try to monitor vaquitas, supported by civil society organizations, deserves special recognition, as does the Government's compliance with several commitments made in its 2023 Action Plan.

However, we remain deeply concerned that definitive actions to secure the survival of vaquitas by preventing fishing with gillnets within their habitat have yet to be implemented. Specifically, key challenges hindering conservation include:

- The continued use of gillnets for fishing throughout the Upper Gulf, except within the Zero Tolerance Area (ZTA, including the so-called Extension Area).
- The lack of significant progress in helping fishing communities transition to alternative, vaquita-safe gear. Without viable alternatives, fishers feel compelled to continue using gillnets, perpetuating a cycle where enforcement is prioritized over transition to vaquita-safe methods. This cycle makes it nearly impossible to eliminate illegal fishing, and breaking the cycle is critical.



- An overemphasis on enforcement efforts within the ZTA. Protecting vaquitas in only that one small area will not enable the population to recover.
- Ongoing gillnetting disrupts visual and acoustic efforts to monitor vaquitas both inside and outside of the ZTA.

To address those challenges, we recommend:

- Expanding surveillance, enforcement, and monitoring efforts to cover the broader known vaquita range beyond the ZTA.
- Making serious investments in the development and widespread adoption of vaquita-safe fishing gear, and ensuring that fishing communities are fully engaged and supported throughout the transition process. Their active participation is essential to foster trust, improve gear acceptance, and provide sustainable livelihoods.

Two recent publications propose that more funding should be devoted to research on the ecological aspects of vaquita habitat because species recovery may not be possible even if the gillnets that kill vaquitas are removed. Rodríguez-Pérez et al. (2024) and Arreguín-Sánchez et al. (2025) argue that changes in habitat and prey availability in the Upper Gulf of California resulting from the damming of the Colorado River have sealed the fate of the vaquita. Because these papers could influence the thinking of CITES Standing Committee members, our group has prepared a [document](#) to set the record straight: there is no evidence that vaquitas are nutritionally stressed or that any factor other than bycatch in gillnets is to blame for the current desperate situation.

We emphasize that addressing challenges exclusively within the ZTA while neglecting the broader Vaquita Refuge where vaquitas were, until the last few decades, relatively common will not suffice to achieve Mexico's conservation goals. The [analysis conducted last year](#) by the Cetacean Specialist Group of Mexico's report on its 2023 Compliance Action Plan, delivered to the Secretary General of CITES, remains highly relevant, as many of the core issues highlighted in that analysis persist.

Our Specialist Group remains ready to collaborate on any efforts that benefit both biodiversity and fishing communities in the Upper Gulf.

Yours sincerely,

Randall Reeves and Gianna Minton,

Co-Chairs, IUCN SSC Cetacean Specialist Group

Cc:

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CITES Standing Committee Members, Alternate Members and Other Interested Parties
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