



IUCN  
Rue Mauverney 28  
1196 Gland  
Switzerland

Tel. +41 22 999 0000  
Fax +41 22 999 0029  
director.general@iucn.org  
www.iucn.org

Premier Li Keqiang  
State Council  
Zhongnanhai  
Xicheng District  
Beijing 100000  
PR of China

7 November, 2014

Your Excellency,

On behalf of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), we write to you concerning the Vaquita (*Phocoena sinus*), a small porpoise found only in Mexico, and the most seriously threatened cetacean species in the world. The Vaquita is currently undergoing a catastrophic decline and faces imminent extinction unless urgent action is taken.

- The Vaquita is under serious threat from entanglement and drowning in gillnets used in a fishing industry in the Upper Gulf of California, Mexico, which targets the Totoaba (*Totoaba macdonaldi*). Both the Vaquita and the Totoaba are listed on The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species™ as Critically Endangered<sup>1,2</sup>, and are found only in the Gulf of California (i.e., nowhere else in the world). According to a recent assessment by a group of international scientists, illegal fishing and the trade in Totoaba swim bladders have caused the Vaquita population to decline at the unprecedented rate of 18% per year, with fewer than 100 individuals now remaining<sup>3,4</sup>.

The Totoaba is the largest species of croaker fish in the world and is listed on Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). In the last few years, there has been extensive illegal fishing, and the evidence strongly indicates that this fishery is driven by trafficking of Totoaba due to the high price and demand for its swim bladders (maw or 'fa gau'). There is a traditional demand for fish maws in China, but the demand is especially strong (and the price particularly high) for the maws of the Chinese

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.iucnredlist.org/details/17028/0>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.iucnredlist.org/details/22003/0>

<sup>3</sup> CIRVA (Comité Internacional para la Recuperación de la Vaquita) (2014) Report of the 5th meeting of the International Committee for the Recovery of the Vaquita. Available at <http://www.iucn-csg.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/Report-of-the-Fifth-Meeting-of-CIRVA.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> International Whaling Commission Scientific Committee (2014) Report of the Scientific Committee, Bled, Slovenia, 12-24 May 2014 (IWC/65/Rep01(2014), 57, section 14.4.1.

Bahaba (*Bahaba taipingensis*) from the coast of China. However, this species is near extinction<sup>5</sup> and is protected in China. China is the only known demand centre in the world for this type of fish maw. There is good evidence that Totoaba maw (or buche-maw) has recently emerged as a substitute for Chinese Bahaba maw in China, because it reaches a similar large size and is of high quality. Because this trade in Totoaba maw appears to be quite recent, it has understandably not been the focus of major CITES enforcement efforts in China (including Hong Kong) so far. Significant forensic expertise or molecular information is needed to conclusively identify Totoaba maws, thus making enforcement more difficult, but work in this area has already begun and genetic information is now available.

Enforcement efforts to combat this recent illegal Totoaba trade have not been successful so far, although the authorities in Mexico and the United States of America have been cooperating to curb the trade (at least some of it has routed through California). In addition to increasing enforcement in Mexico, it is an urgent priority to stop the trade in Totoaba maws at the points of import into China, and to prohibit their consumption.

IUCN respectfully appeals to the Chinese Government to cooperate and coordinate efforts with the Governments of Mexico and the United States to discover and stop the illegal shipments and trade of Totoaba to China (i.e., both Hong Kong and mainland China). Furthermore, as mentioned above, the United States Government is engaged with Mexico on enforcement against the illegal Totoaba trade. It could, in turn, be a willing partner with China in providing forensic expertise to assist in identifying Totoaba maws, thus supporting your enforcement efforts. We also ask China to investigate the markets and areas to which Totoaba have been shipped and sold, while Mexico investigates possible direct routes from Mexico to China (e.g., flights from Tijuana to Shanghai).

IUCN would normally wait until there is more hard data before writing to you on such a matter. However, because the situation with the Vaquita is such an emergency, we believe that we cannot wait. As mentioned above, the Vaquita has a tiny population and is declining at 18% per year because of the Totoaba fishery. We have a very short time left to save the species. We do not have the luxury to wait for perfect information because then it will be too late. And if the Vaquita goes extinct, there is a risk that China, as the only known demand centre for Totoaba maw, will also be criticised publicly for not having acted earlier to stop the illegal Totoaba trade while there was still time.

However, rather than facing criticism, we believe the current situation is an excellent opportunity for the Government of China to demonstrate inspirational leadership, and build on its recent introduction of austerity measures to limit luxury spending. By taking the critical actions outlined above in order to save two Critically Endangered species from extinction, China would set an example to the world. IUCN stands ready to provide technical assistance and support, or any other help, as needed.

Thank you for your consideration of this issue.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.iucnredlist.org/details/61334/0>

Yours sincerely and respectfully,



Julia Marton-Lefèvre  
Director General



Simon N. Stuart, PhD  
Chair, IUCN Species Survival Commission

Copies to:

Ministry of Commerce  
General Administration of Customs  
Ministry of Agriculture  
State Forestry Administration  
CITES Management Authority of PR China  
Office of the Chief Executive, Hong Kong SAR  
Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department, Hong Kong SAR  
Director of Health, Hong Kong SAR  
Director of Environmental Protection Department, Hong Kong SAR  
President, IUCN