



# The Society for Marine Mammalogy

<http://www.marinemammalogy.org>

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Dr. Mechtild Rössler  
Director of the World Heritage Centre  
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Dear Dr. Rössler,

I am writing to express the Society for Marine Mammalogy's grave concern about the status of the Islands and Protected Areas of the Gulf of California World Heritage Site and the Society's strong support for the recommendation to inscribe this site on the list of World Heritage Sites in Danger.

A key Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) of the site in question is its extraordinary diversity of marine life, which includes the vaquita, a Critically Endangered porpoise, and the totoaba, a Critically Endangered fish, both endemic to the northern Gulf. As noted in the report on the state of conservation of properties inscribed on the World Heritage List and draft decision, the vaquita population has dramatically declined in recent decades and is now on the brink of extinction. In its 2019 report, the Comité Internacional para la Recuperación de la Vaquita (CIRVA) stated that within the last few years alone (since 2011), the vaquita population has declined by 98%. The committee considered it likely that only 10 (range 6-22) individuals remained alive in 2018 (<http://www.iucn-csg.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/CIRVA-11-Final-Report-6-March.pdf>). The population decline is entirely due to drowning in gillnets, most of them set illegally for totoaba, whose swim bladders are in great demand in mainland China and Hong Kong.

Despite significant efforts by the scientific and conservation communities, and by the Mexican government, illegal fishing for totoaba and the consequently unsustainable levels of vaquita mortality continue. The illegal fishing also kills, as bycatch, dozens of other marine creatures, including other marine mammals, sea turtles, and sharks. The few surviving vaquitas occupy a small portion of the species' range that lies within the World Heritage site. CIRVA has insisted that this area be strictly protected against the setting of gillnets, but there is no evidence that this had been accomplished during the last totoaba fishing season, which ended last month.

If the vaquita is to have any chance of recovery, it is imperative that Mexico stop fishing practices in the upper Gulf that kill vaquitas,



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and the international community must aid Mexico in its efforts to do this. In particular, the United States and China, as countries involved in the illegal transit and consumption of totoaba products, must work with Mexican law enforcement to end the illegal trade in totoaba swim bladders. China and other consumer countries must make a concerted effort to eliminate the demand for these products. While Mexico, the United States, and China have all taken positive steps in these areas, the efforts have been insufficient to slow the vaquita's decline toward extinction. A decision by the World Heritage Committee to approve the "in danger" designation would give Mexico greater incentive to take immediate concrete action, with the support of international collaborators, to preserve the OUV of this threatened property, including the vaquita and other endangered species. *Among the specific actions that could be taken immediately are to strengthen support for the existing fishing gear removal program, to develop and socialize alternative fishing gear and to impose more effective measures to eliminate the trade in totoaba swim bladders.*

The Society for Marine Mammalogy is the world's largest professional group dedicated to the study of marine mammals. We have a membership of approximately 2,000 scientists from more than 30 countries, including a strong representation from Mexico. Our goal is to facilitate the understanding and conservation of marine mammals and the ecosystems that support them. We believe that identifying the status of the Islands and Protected Areas of the Gulf of California World Heritage site as in danger would contribute to the conservation of the vaquita, totoaba, and other marine life.

Thank you for considering our concerns on this important matter. I respectfully request that the Society's support for this recommendation be noted during the deliberations on this agenda item and that this letter be made part of the record of the upcoming 43<sup>rd</sup> session of the World Heritage Committee.

Sincerely,

D. Ann Pabst  
President, Society for Marine Mammalogy

cc: Mr. Guy Debonnet, Programme Specialist, World Heritage Centre  
Mr. Peter Shadie, Director, World Heritage Programme, International Union for  
Conservation of Nature  
Distinguished Members of the World Heritage Committee