



WWF

BRIEFING

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## SMALL CETACEANS

64<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the International Whaling Commission Panama City, Panama

Small cetaceans are among the most endangered and yet least assessed marine species of the world. Over half of the known small cetacean species are classified by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) as data deficient, meaning there is simply not enough information available to determine whether they are threatened or not. What is known however is that all small cetacean species for which the population trend is known, are in decline.

### Threats

The biggest threat to cetaceans today (both large and small) is incidental capture in fishing operations (bycatch). It is estimated that more than 300,000 whales, dolphins and porpoises die each year from entanglement in many types of fishing gear, which is an average of one cetacean killed by bycatch every two minutes.

### Action is Needed Now

In the following sections we summarise the issues faced by two of the world's most endangered small cetaceans, the Mexican vaquita and Maui's dolphin from New Zealand. Both species are severely threatened by bycatch in gillnet fisheries. Immediate action is needed to completely ban the use of gillnets from the entire ranges of both species. Without this measure, these species may follow in the footsteps of the first cetacean to become extinct because of human-induced causes, the Chinese baiji.

# Vaquita

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The vaquita is the world's most endangered porpoise (the smallest group of cetaceans). It measures less than 1.5 m and is only found in the upper Gulf of California. Researchers estimate its population to have been around 5,000 in the 1940s, but only 570 were found in 1997 and that number dropped to 245 in 2008. Under the current bycatch rate, today the vaquita population is thought to be fewer than 200 individuals.

## Conservation Efforts

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Since 2007 the Mexican government has invested USD \$30 million in vaquita conservation. A voluntary buy-out scheme was established to reduce gillnet fishing, achieving a 25 percent reduction. A vaquita refuge where gillnets are banned was created in 2005.

Yet, even with these efforts, vaquita is far from being out of danger. There are new threats, such as illegal fishing inside the refuge, longer gillnets being used, and the remaining fishers not willing to participate in the gillnet buy-out scheme.

*The International Committee for the Recovery of the Vaquita (CIRVA) believes that if the continuing decline in vaquita abundance is not halted within the next few years (by 2017) the species may become too depleted to recover<sup>1</sup>.*

## IWC's Intervention

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Since 1991 the International Whaling Commission's Scientific Committee has recommended that conservation actions must be taken to immediately eliminate bycatch of the vaquita. In 2007 an IWC resolution urged: "*the members of the IWC and the world community to support Mexico's efforts to prevent the extinction of the vaquita by reducing bycatch to zero in the immediate future, and assist in providing financial resources and technical as well as socio-economic expertise.*"

Thanks to IWC support, and with the help of WWF Mexico, the Mexican National Fisheries Institute (INAPESCA) is developing alternative "vaquita friendly" fishing gear for catching finfish. In the meantime, a small modified "vaquita-friendly" trawl net for catching shrimp is in the process of being approved under Mexican legislation, providing fishers with an alternative to continue fishing shrimp without driving the vaquita to extinction.

## A Call for Action

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Mexico's *Action Program for the Conservation of Species: Vaquita* is up for review. Although the four year work plan period has reached an end, CIRVA's report outlines that many activities did not achieve the desired results. **WWF commends the Government of Mexico for positive steps taken to date, and further calls on Mexico to enforce a complete ban on gillnet use within the entire habitat of the vaquita.**

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<sup>1</sup> Report of the Fourth Meeting of CIRVA

# Maui's Dolphin

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Maui's dolphins are among the world's smallest and rarest marine dolphins—endemic only to New Zealand's North Island. Maui's were classified as Critically Endangered by the IUCN in 2000. As recently as the 1970's it was thought that around 2,000 Maui's dolphins existed; but with an estimated 55 individuals over the age of one year remaining today, Maui's dolphins are on the brink of extinction.

Hector's dolphins, of which Maui's dolphins are a sub-species, exist in New Zealand's South Island, and are classified by IUCN as endangered.

## Threats

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Maui's and Hector's dolphins occur in shallow coastal waters, which means they are in close proximity to a variety of human activities. Scientists have identified entanglement in gillnets and trawl nets as the greatest threats to these dolphins. These fisheries have historically had very poor independent observer coverage and it is thought many dolphin deaths go unreported. Other threats include boat-strikes; habitat loss or degradation and acoustic disturbance through coastal development, mining, oil and gas activities and tidal energy generation; prey depletion and other ecosystem impacts.

## Hope Remains

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Although the latest population estimate presents a seriously low, and potentially declining, abundance of Maui's dolphins, scientists have good reason to believe that all hope is not lost. Maui's genetic diversity, albeit low, has been retained; they are travelling considerable distances throughout their range; their sex ratio is equal; the number of pregnant females is as expected; and there has been a discovery of two female Hector's migrants, who have the potential to enhance the genetic diversity of the Maui's population. With appropriate protection, it is reasonable to believe that Maui's can survive and, potentially, recover their numbers.

## A Call to Action

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Protection measures were introduced in 2003 and significantly improved in 2008, but they still do not adequately protect Maui's dolphins. Surveys suggest 83 percent of New Zealanders want the government to act to save these species, and they support banning the use of gillnets and trawl nets throughout their range. **WWF acknowledges the positive steps taken to date, but given the urgent conservation situation, we call on the New Zealand government to act immediately to further protect Maui's dolphins by banning the use of gillnets and inshore trawling throughout the dolphins' entire current and historic range and to guarantee compliance for all vessels operating within their habitat.**

WWF is not opposed to all fishing, but believes a switch to more selective, sustainable methods is necessary. There is alternative gear that can be used such as long lining, fish trapping, trolling, angling and spear fishing. New Zealand has a history of bringing back animals from the edge of extinction. With urgent government action to remove the threat of nets from Maui's habitat, this sub-species can be saved.