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Government Extends Protection for Endangered Porpoises in Gulf of California

by Carlos Navarro

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The Mexican government has extended for a brief period the fishing restrictions imposed two years ago to protect the endangered vaquita porpoise in the northern areas of the Gulf of California, also known as the Sea of Cortés, and in the Colorado River Delta ([SourceMex, March 25, 2015](#), and [Sept. 30, 2015](#)). The restrictions, which originally ended on March 31, were extended until the end of May while the government works on a proposal to implement a permanent ban on the use of gillnets.

The fishing restrictions have failed to provide the needed protection for the vaquita because of the difficulty in monitoring and enforcing regulations. With some fishing vessels continuing to use illegal fishing devices, the vaquita population has been cut in half. According to government scientists and environmental organizations, the number of vaquitas had declined to about 30 specimens as of November 2016, compared with 60 porpoises recorded in 2014.

Seeking a permanent ban on gillnets

The Secretaría de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (Department of Environment and Natural Resources, SEMARNAT), reiterated that a permanent ban on the use of gillnets is the only way to protect the vaquitas and the totoaba, another endangered species targeted by fishing vessels in the Gulf of California. The bladder of this giant fish is in high demand in China, where the dried organ is used to prepare soup. Some consumers believe it has medicinal properties.

Authorities have access to a new tool to enforce the protection of endangered species: a recent change to the federal penal code that elevated the intentional capture and trade of protected aquatic animal species to the status of organized crime, regardless of the existence of fishing bans.

As part of a scheme to protect the vaquita, the Mexican government also plans to allocate the equivalent of US\$3 million to implement an emergency plan to save the vaquita from extinction, including the transfer of the porpoises to a temporary refuge.

Local fishing communities have not been entirely pleased with the restrictions, mostly because the alternatives and compensation offered by authorities were not satisfactory. A spokesperson for the community of fishing villages in the northern Gulf of California pointed out, however, that the two-month extension was a viable option to allow all sides to work on a solution. "The decision was made not only by the authorities; it was a request made by the fishing sector and the community of the upper gulf," said Sunshine Antonio Rodríguez Peña, who represents the fishers.

Rodríguez Peña said the fishing communities examined a plan adopted by the national fishing institute (Instituto Nacional de Pesca, INAPESCA) and concluded that these measures "were not ready for the transition to new fishing techniques, which they claim are sustainable."

Furthermore, Rodríguez Peña pointed out that the fishing communities are committed to finding alternative fishing methods to protect the vaquita. "Schemes and alternatives keep changing, but

we're returning to the sea, one way or the other," he said in an interview with the daily newspaper Reforma.

In addition to extending the restrictions, SEMARNAT announced that the Mexican Navy, the country's environmental protection agency (Procuraduría Federal de Protección al Ambiente, PROFEPA), and environmental law-enforcement personnel would increase surveillance in the northern regions of the Gulf of California to prevent illegal fishing.

SEMARNAT had relied on the non-governmental environmental organization Sea Shepherd Conservation Society (SSCS) to monitor the area with two vessels. The organization said it has retrieved 200 illegal fishing devices since last December. At the end of March, the SSCS summoned a third vessel to help with the monitoring activities.

One of the illegal gillnets discovered by a joint operation by PROFEPA, the Navy ministry (Secretaría de Marina, SEMAR), and SSCS contained 20 dead totoabas that had been ensnared in an illegal fishing net.

"With this latest number, the federal government has recovered a total of 300 specimens of ... preventing these fish from reaching their destination, which is the black market in Asia," the daily newspaper El Universal reported.

In addition to seizing the illegal catch, authorities have seized 15 fishing boats, 180 motor boats, 40 vehicles, and 900 nets and other items, including the 200 devices that were seized between December 2016 and March 2017. Authorities said some of the owners of these properties were linked directly to the death of four vaquitas. Officials have also brought criminal complaints against 174 individuals accused of trafficking in protected and endangered species.

Fishers protest loss of livelihood

In the days before the two-year ban was to expire, the fishing communities expressed their anger at both the government and the SSCS. In a protest at the end of March, more than 700 fishers gathered in the coastal village of San Felipe in Baja California state to express their discontent with the situation. To underscore their anger, the protesters set fire to a fishing boat. The vessel contained a sign warning PROFEPA and the national fishing commission (Comisión Nacional de Acuacultura y Pesca, CONAPESCA) that the fishing communities would not accept the loss of their livelihood.

As the vessel burned, some protesters shouted, "This is what [the government] wants to do with our fishing boats."

Rodríguez Peña, who led the rally, addressed the protesters. "Why do we have to accept what they say," he asked them. "We have to fish, we have to reclaim the sea."

At the rally, the protesters made several demands, including the removal of vessels from the SSCS or any other environmental organization from the Gulf of California. "If they are going to be here, they have to bring us jobs and proposals for San Felipe," Rodríguez Peña said. "We don't want them if they are going to destroy our fishing vessels and threaten us."

The second demand was for the government to withdraw a proposal, currently open to public comment, to ban the use of gillnets permanently. A third related proposal was to direct INAPESCA to find solutions for the fishing communities.

“They want to eliminate gillnets on a permanent basis through the creation of a norm,” Rodríguez Peña said. “They are doing so without giving us any compensation.”

The SSCS, which is working directly with SEMARNAT, has faced threats from some members of the local fishing communities, but officials for the environmental group are confident their monitoring efforts will be protected. “We are sure that the Mexican Navy will provide us with the security we need to continue our efforts to prevent the extinction of the vaquita,” SSCS founder Paul Watson said in a message posted on Facebook.

The Mexican government’s efforts to protect the vaquita have also received support from several international organizations and institutions, including Duke University, the Marine Mammal Commission, the ocean and coasts division of the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Dolphin Quest, the Association of Zoos & Aquariums (AZA), the International Marine Animal Trainers’ Association (IMATA), SeaWorld Theme Parks, and the Vancouver Aquarium in British Columbia.

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