

¡VIVA VAQUITA!

*a race against time to save an elusive
yet endangered marine mammal*



by THOMAS A. JEFFERSON AND CANDIDA KUTZ



Discovered only a half century ago, the vaquita (*Phocoena sinus*) is now considered the most endangered cetacean in the world, a distinction previously held by the baiji (*Lipotes vexillifer*), or Chinese river dolphin, until it was declared extinct in 2006. Among the smallest of the cetaceans, the vaquita, which means “little cow” in Spanish, had an estimated population of more than 500 as recently as the 1990s. Today some

200 remain in the shallow waters of Mexico's Gulf of California.

The vaquita is listed as critically endangered by the IUCN Red List, and has received a great deal of attention within the IUCN Cetacean Specialist Group and the International Whaling Commission's Small Cetacean Subcommittee. Based on expected levels of decline, a window of only a few years exists in which to implement solutions to save the species. After that, it will likely be too late.

The primary threat facing the species is incidental kills in various fisheries, mainly in several gill net fisheries. In fact, this is the only well-documented threat to the population, and studies on bycatch have given clear indications that the kills are unsustainable and undoubtedly responsible for the decline of the small population. Concerns for the species include potential habitat alteration due to a drastic reduction of freshwater outflow of the Colorado River, which empties into the gulf, as a result of damming.

In recent years, there has been virtually unanimous agreement among researchers and conservationists that what is needed to save the species is complete elimination of gill net mortality. The International Committee for the Recovery of the Vaquita (CIRVA) has convened three times to discuss the species' situation and has come to the same conclusion. Some limited progress has been made toward closing down the gill net fisheries that threaten the vaquita, but, not surprisingly, this has proven difficult, and many fishermen and fishing collectives have been resistant. It is now clear that the only hope for the species is a program that eliminates gill nets and that at the same time is providing economic incentives and aid to the fishermen so they can find alternative sources of income. Such a plan would require several million U.S. dollars to implement.

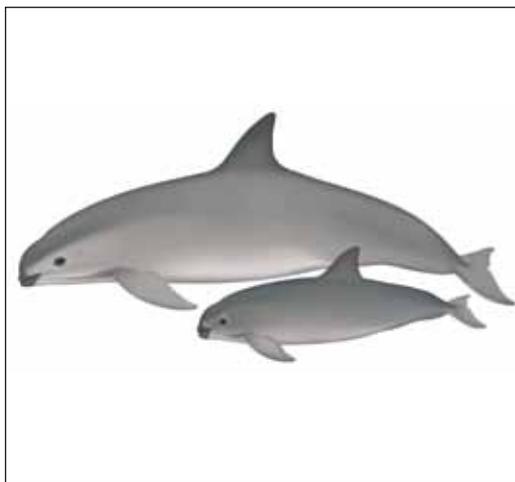
While environmental groups have often used compelling imagery of endangered species to

elicit funds for their conservation campaigns, such an approach has, until recently, proven difficult for the vaquita, a notoriously shy and elusive creature. In October 2008, however, we conducted a photographic pilot study on vaquitas, during which we were able to get sufficiently close to obtain high-quality images of the animals in their natural habitat. These are now being used by several NGOs to publicize the plight of the species and gain support for its conservation.

The success of this pilot effort made it clear that it is possible to study and monitor the vaquita population through visual observation and photography/videography. A preliminary photo-identification catalog of six individuals has been established, and further photo identification can

provide answers to many critical questions. There is also a strong need to continue efforts to keep the threats to the vaquita at the forefront of endangered species discussions. There are still many people even in the surrounding areas of northern Baja California and southern and central California who do not know about the vaquita's plight. We

have launched two programs to increase public awareness of the vaquita—PAVE (Photographic Assessment of Vaquita Ecology), which is focused on research, and CARE (Community Awareness and Regional Education). For more information on the vaquita and what you can do to help, please visit: www.vivavaquita.org. 



BIOGRAPHY

A specialist in marine mammals, Thomas A. Jefferson, Ph.D., is an independent researcher who works with Clymene Enterprises and is an advisor to the CETOS Research Organization (www.cetosresearch.org). A member of The Explorers Club since 2009, Candida "Dida" Kutz has been instrumental in the founding and management of iVivaVaquita!, a grassroots NGO dedicated to preserving the vaquita.