ONE OF THE WORLD’S most endangered marine animals is a pintsize porpoise known as the vaquita. It exists only in the Gulf of California off Mexico. No one knows exactly how many are now alive; by 2018 fewer than 19 were left, researchers estimate. Unless the species’ decline can be slowed, vaquitas likely will become extinct before 2021, which raises the question: How did we let this happen?

A stocky creature about four and a half feet long, the vaquita is the smallest of the cetaceans, a family that includes whales, dolphins, and porpoises. Dark pigment edging vaquitas’ eyes gives them a bovine look; in Spanish, the animal’s name means “little cow.”

Shortly after scientists discovered the species in 1950, they realized it was in trouble. Vaquitas were regularly drowning in gill nets meant for shrimp and totoabas, a fish whose swim bladder is a delicacy in China. In 1975, after the totoaba was declared endangered, Mexico outlawed fishing for it. But the work is easier, more lucrative, and less risky than drug trafficking, so totoaba fishing continues—as do the deaths of vaquitas as bycatch.

In 2005 Mexico’s government made part of the gulf a vaquita refuge. But the population kept falling—from more than 200 individuals in 2008 to fewer than 30 in 2016. Unable to protect vaquitas in the wild, the government made an unprecedented attempt to protect them in captivity. In 2017 an international team of scientists, veterinarians, and conservationists gathered in Mexico to stage VaquitaCPR, a multimillion-dollar project to transfer half of the remaining vaquitas into protected sea pens until their safety in the wild could be assured. The team captured two females—but when both began showing signs of stress, they were released. One of them didn’t survive, and VaquitaCPR was discontinued.

Wildlife biologist Matthew Podolsky contends that “even if that vaquita hadn’t died and the capture effort had been successful, the root of the problem would still remain”: Impoverished poachers, greedy cartels, and corrupt officials would still care more about catching totoabas than protecting vaquitas. Podolsky co-directed Sea of Shadows, a National Geographic documentary about activists’ and undercover investigators’ work to help save the species.

In this fight against extinction, Podolsky sees a cautionary tale about the importance of protecting rare animals “at the first sign of trouble”—not when only a few of them remain.
TAKE A SMART STEP TOWARD YOUR FINANCIAL FUTURE

Establishing a charitable gift annuity with the National Geographic Society is a simple and safe way you can receive guaranteed payments for life and save on taxes—while protecting critical animal species like this jaguar cub for generations to come.

PHOTO: JOEL SARTORE
NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC PHOTO ARK

SIMPLE + SAFE. SECURE YOUR FUTURE.

☐ Yes! I am interested in a charitable gift annuity. Please send me a custom illustration of my estimated payout rate, payment, and tax savings.

Gift Amount: $ ____________
(Minimum gift is $10,000)

Please indicate birthdates for up to two beneficiaries:

☐ I have some questions. Please call me.

Mail to: National Geographic Society
Office of Planned Giving
1145 17th Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20036-4688

Contact: legacy@ngs.org
(800) 226-4438
natgeo.org/give/future-gifts

NAME
ADDRESS
PHONE
EMAIL

The National Geographic Society is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. Our federal tax ID number is 53-0193519

19PGAD10
THE CARTELS, THE BLACK MARKET AND THE FIGHT TO SAVE A SPECIES

"A HEART-GRABBING EXPOSE." VARIETY

"URGENT AND SUSPENSEFUL." HOLLYWOOD REPORTER

"BRILLIANT AND ALARMING." AWARDS CREDIT

FROM EXECUTIVE PRODUCER LEONARDO DICAPRIO AND THE MAKERS OF THE IVORY GAME

SEA OF SHADOWS

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC DOCUMENTARY FILMS

COMMERCIAL FREE BROADCAST PREMIERE SATURDAY NOVEMBER 9 9/8c
WHAT PAIN?

RELIANCE THAT’S FAST. STRENGTH THAT LASTS.
WHAT WE LOSE WHEN AN ANIMAL GOES EXTINCT

Last of Its Kind

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC
There’s always room for more stories.

The 2019 Subaru Crosstrek. The spacious interior and large cargo area keep the journey comfortable, and make sure there’s room for all that you pick up along the way. Standard Symmetrical All-Wheel Drive + 33 mpg makes the going good. Love is out there. Find it in a Crosstrek.

Crosstrek. Well-equipped at $21,895.

Subaru and Crosstrek are registered trademarks. EPA-estimated highway fuel economy for 2019 Subaru Crosstrek CVT models. Actual mileage may vary. MSRP excludes destination and delivery charges, tax, title, and fees. Retailer sets actual price. Certain equipment may be required in specific states, which can modify your actual MSRP. See your retailer for details. 2019 Subaru Crosstrek 2.0 Premium shown has an MSRP of $20,085.