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## **Border Cetacean Faces Extinction**

Mexican environmentalists and government officials warn that a unique marine mammal is in grave danger of extinction. Wildlife advocates express growing concern over the fate of the vaquita marina, a cetacean found only in the upper Gulf of California, or Sea of Cortez. According to the latest census findings, only 150 of the elusive creatures remain alive; the numbers represent a sharp drop from the late 1990s when between 500-600 of the cetaceans were detected. Environmental officials and activists blame fishing activities for threatening the existence of the vaquita marina.

“The elimination of the main cause of its mortality, which is the use of gillnets by fishermen, should be guaranteed,” said Adrian Fernandez, president of Mexico’s National Ecology Institute.

At first glance an unlikely parent of whales and dolphins, the vaquita marina weighs about 100 pounds and reaches less than six feet in length. The first specimen was discovered in 1958.

To protect the endangered animal, Mexican authorities have decreed nearly more than two million acres of the upper Gulf of California and the Colorado River Delta as a protected biosphere. Nonetheless, fishing has continued in most of the reserve- with the exception of the delta area. Efforts to protect the vaquita marina have caused friction with native fishermen who depend on the sea for their survival.

In 2005, Mexico’s Secretariat of the Environment and Natural Resources (Semarnat) signed an agreement with the State of Baja California to provide economic resources to fishermen in the community of San Felipe. As of October 15, 2007, 15 projects for 16 cooperatives had been approved as part of the accord. Valued at approximately \$650,000, the money was earmarked for the purchase of safer fishing equipment, better boat motors, modern navigation devices and alternative economic development projects.

After a joint tour of the vaquita marina’s habitat earlier this month, Semarnat Secretary Juan Elvira and Agriculture Secretary Alberto Cardenas announced an inter-agency initiative to invest another \$10 million into conservation-alternative economic development projects aimed at helping the vaquita marina recover. Environmentalists caution that action cannot come too soon.

“It is urgent to avoid the extinction of the vaquita marina,” said Omar Vidal, Mexico director for the World Wildlife Fund. “The latest studies indicate that perhaps we have only one or two years to get this done.”

Sources: La Jornada, March 7 and 12, 2008. Articles by Angelica Enciso and the Reuters news agency. Semarnat.gob.mx Vaquitamarina.org