

Celebration of Conservation

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Vaquita Refuge Coordinates

Latitude: 31°15 N

Longitude: 114°30 W

FROM: Jake, the SeaDog
TO: Team Vaquita Virtual Science Team
SUBJECT: The Vaquita: Shy, cute, and in trouble

Hello Team Vaquita!

One thing you might discover as you talk about vaquitas with family and friends is that few people have ever heard of this tiny whale. At first that might seem strange. After all, the vaquita has a lot in common with other animals that people like. Vaquitas are adorable whales. Vaquitas are also in trouble. Less than 30 vaquitas are left in the entire world. Most people want to help an animal in trouble. This should be big news.

So why aren't vaquitas mentioned everywhere like pandas, elephants, tigers, or other endangered animals or simply popular animals like killer whales? One reason might be where vaquitas live. Vaquitas live in a small area of the Gulf of California. Check out a map of North America. See the long finger of land that extends along the west coast of Mexico. Now look for the skinny bit of blue between that finger and the main part of Mexico. That's the Gulf of California. Never heard of it? Neither have most people. There aren't any large cities on most of the Gulf's coast. Vaquitas only live in a tiny area of the north end of the Gulf that's about the size of Yellowstone National Park.

Another reason vaquitas haven't received as much attention might be because vaquitas are difficult to photograph. Vaquitas avoid boats. Because of this, researchers only get within a half-mile from them. That's eight football fields away! Plus, vaquitas are not acrobats leaping out of the water like other whales. The only photographs people get of living vaquitas are distant photos of backs and dorsal fins when vaquitas surface to breathe.

Why not set up a camera "trap" to photograph the vaquita under water? This method has been very successful for researchers studying snow leopards or jaguars. The cats trigger a motion sensor to take their own photograph. Of course, snow leopards live on land, so that makes it easier in general (Though easy isn't quite how snow leopard scientists might describe it!).

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The Vaquita: Shy, cute, and in trouble (continued)

Scientists place the cameras along routine paths the snow leopards travel. Would this work in the water? No. Not for vaquitas. The water where vaquitas live isn't clear. Strong currents keep sediments swirling around so it's hard to see anything.

Shy and difficult to photograph...can you think of other reasons why vaquitas may not be receiving as much attention as other endangered animals?

There are less than 30 vaquita left in the entire world. So why do killer whales or dolphins or... pandas...receive so much more attention?

Shy, cute, and in trouble. Vaquita need your help. What are some ways you can help raise awareness of the vaquita?

Jake

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Celebration of Conservation Mission

