

FOR THIS SPECIES, PROTECTION IS TOO LITTLE, TOO LATE

BY ANNIE ROTH

SEA OF SHADOWS

This documentary on the vaquita's plight will air commercial free November 9 at 9/8c on National Geographic, and is available for order on Amazon, the Apple TV app, and GooglePlay.

ONE OF THE WORLD'S most endangered marine animals is a pint-size 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. □

