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Vanishing Vaquita

The Vaquita (*Phocoena sinus*) was first officially documented in 1954 by Kenneth Norris and became fully known to the scientific community in 1958. These animals were actually caught by fisherman for a long time, but they did not know that it was a cetacean. They were discovered in the upper Gulf of California near the Colorado River Delta. This is the only habitat these animals live in. It is a very localized and specific.

These animals have been observed typically in shallow, murky lagoons along the shoreline where fresh water from the Colorado River mixes with oceanic salt water. The Vaquita has rarely been recorded in waters deeper than 95 feet. Due to the water conditions of their habitat, obtaining a population count is very difficult. There is believed to be less than 450 animals in this area based on a survey done in 2005. This low number causes the Vaquita to be listed as one of the most endangered cetacean species in the world.

The Vaquita's coloring is characterized by a dark patch around each eye, dark coloring around its lips, dark grey on the upper side of the body and becoming grayish white as the color goes down the body; typical counter shading. The dorsal fin is prominent and shark like. A full grown Vaquita ranges from 4 to 5 feet in length. A newborn is approximately 24 to 28 inches in length.

This marine mammal is in the family Phocoenidae, meaning that it is a porpoise, not a dolphin. One difference between the two families is their teeth. Porpoises have spade shaped teeth where a dolphin has conical shaped teeth.

Their diet consist of fish, mollusks, squid and crustaceans. It has been observed that they feed and swim in a leisurely manner but avoid boats.

The main threat to Vaquitas are man. The Gulf of California is an ideal place for sea fare harvesting. This means many of the animals are treated as by-catch from nets. There have been major steps in reducing the number of animals caught in the by-catch. Groups in both Mexico and the United States are working on plans to find a compromise; still allowing fisherman to earn a living and not do harm to the animals. One such group is the International Committee for the Recovery of the Vaquita (CIRVA). The hope of these organizations is to have a feasible plan that would benefit the local fishermen, allow the Vaquita's population to grow, and protect the environment.

Research is also being done to look at factors such as the reduced flow of the Colorado River (tributary to the Gulf of California) and the number of fishing vessels that use the area. It has been determined that pesticides are not a risk factor for these animals.

Despite its late discovery in the 1950's great strides have been made to understand this unique animal and its habitat.