



Society for Conservation Biology

A global community of conservation professionals

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Bureau of Fisheries
Ministry of Agriculture
No.11 Nongzhanguan Nanli,
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Beijing
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On behalf of the Society for Conservation Biology (SCB¹), we write to request that you implement increased enforcement of existing laws prohibiting the illegal sale of totoaba (*Totoaba macdonaldi*) swim bladders. This market threatens to push two species, the totoaba and the vaquita (*Phocoena sinus*), further towards extinction.

The totoaba is a native fish of the Gulf of California, found between Baja California and mainland Mexico. It is listed on the Mexican Endangered Species List (NOM-059-SEMARNAT-2010) and is categorized as Critically Endangered by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) due to its long lifespan, slow growth, delayed reproduction, and historical fishing pressure. However, Mexican fishermen still illegally target this species for its swim bladder, while discarding everything else. The bladders are dried and shipped primarily to China, where it is highly prized for its purported, but unproven, ability to rejuvenate skin and act as an aphrodisiac.

Listed on Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade of Endangered Species (CITES), commercial trade of totoaba is prohibited by CITES signatories, which includes both Mexico and China. The totoaba is thus protected by national laws within China implementing CITES under the authority of the State Forestry Administration. However, these protections have been insufficient in halting the trade of totoaba swim bladders, which has escalated dramatically over the last two years. This trade is also to blame for increasing the rate of decline of the vaquita population over the same period, to around

¹ SCB is an international professional organization whose mission is to advance the science and practice of conserving the Earth's biological diversity, support dissemination of conservation science, and increase the application of science to management and policy. The Society's 5,000 members include resource managers, educators, students, government and private conservation workers in over 140 countries.



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50%, leaving fewer than 100 remaining animals. The vaquita is the world's smallest cetacean and it is frequently entangled in fishing nets set for totoaba. Found only in the northern Gulf of California, the vaquita could soon become the second cetacean species to be driven to extinction by humans, largely as a result of the illegal totoaba fishery.

We thus strongly urge the Chinese government to enforce existing national and international laws prohibiting the import of totoaba parts, and educate the public as to the impacts of the totoaba trade to diminish demand. Stopping the illegal flow of totoaba swim bladders into China should decrease the existing incentives supporting the capture and import of this endangered species. By simply upholding its existing laws, the Chinese government can play a crucial role in pulling these two species back from the brink of extinction. SCB gladly commits to contributing the expertise of our members to the relevant government officials during this process.

Sincerely,

John A. Cigliano, PhD,
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Rurik List, PhD,
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