

SCIENCE FOR ALL

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The vaquita porpoise is the world's smallest marine mammal and is believed to be on the brink of extinction, with 10 or fewer still living in Mexico's Gulf of California, their sole habitat. The biggest threat to the species is not habitat loss or genetic factors but illegal "gillnet" fishing.

The porpoises, which range from 4 to 5 feet in length, often become entangled and die in the large mesh gillnets used by poachers hunting the totoaba, an endangered fish highly valued in some countries for its perceived medicinal properties. While Mexico has outlawed totoaba fishing and made the use of these nets in the vaquitas' habitat illegal, many say the bans are not always enforced.

A team of researchers analysed the genomes of 20 vaquitas that lived between 1985 and 2017 and conducted computational simulations to predict the species' extinction risk over the next 50 years. They concluded that if gillnet fishing were to end immediately, the vaquita had a very high chance of recovery, even with inbreeding. Often species with few members tend to be susceptible to genetic diseases from inbreeding.

But because the vaquitas have always been a small population in a very small habitat in the northern tip of the gulf, their genetic make-up is unlikely to be threatening.

Of 12 marine mammal species analysed -- including vaquitas -- the porpoises had the fewest number of potentially harmful mutations.

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