

MARINE MAMMAL COMMISSION
4340 EAST-WEST HIGHWAY, ROOM 905
BETHESDA, MD 20814

11 April 2007

The Honorable Condoleezza Rice
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Rice:

In November and December 2006 an international team of scientists searched China's Yangtze River for signs of the "baiji," or Yangtze River dolphin. They failed to find a single individual; the species is either extinct or on the edge of extinction. Unfortunately, a number of marine mammal populations in different parts of the world's oceans are at high risk of extinction.

The vaquita may be the next species to be lost. This small porpoise is endemic to the Gulf of California, where its numbers and range have declined rapidly from incidental entanglement and death in fishing nets. The vaquita's peril has been documented by Mexican and U.S. scientists, who tell us that the current number of this beautiful but shy species is almost certainly only in the low 100s. Time is rapidly running out. The fundamental challenge is for responsible and concerned agencies and organizations to mount a concerted effort to save this species, both as a vital element of the gulf ecosystem and as an invaluable part of Mexico's natural heritage.

The primary obstacles are socioeconomic. Local fishermen from three northern gulf communities—El Golfo de Santa Clara, Puerto Peñasco, and San Felipe—use gillnets to fish for shrimp, croaker, and a number of other species. While seeking to provide for themselves and their families, they are unintentionally killing vaquitas at a rate that the species cannot withstand. Removing gillnets from vaquita habitat is essential. Socioeconomic options include development of alternative fishing methods, alternative livelihoods for the fishermen, and alternative socioeconomic bases for their communities. A range of conservation efforts has been initiated, but they lack the necessary support, resources, and commitment from higher levels of government in either Mexico or the United States. Such backing is now vital to the vaquita's survival.

We recognize that the Department of State faces profound challenges around the world. Nonetheless, we hope you agree that avoiding the extinction of another species at our hands is among those deserving swift, decisive action. You are in a unique position to bring leadership to this issue. Therefore, under authority of the Marine Mammal Protection Act to advise the Department of State, the U.S. Marine Mammal Commission urges you to promote joint action and investment by the Mexican and U.S. governments to achieve the needed socioeconomic transition necessary for vaquita conservation. Our chairman, Dr. John Reynolds, and I would welcome an opportunity to discuss this matter with you and your staff.

Sincerely,



Timothy J. Ragen, Ph.D.
Executive Director

cc: Claudia McMurray, A/S for Oceans, Environment, and Science