

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

1 November 2007

Vice Admiral Conrad C. Lautenbacher, Jr., Ph.D.
Undersecretary for Oceans and Atmosphere
U.S. Department of Commerce
14th and Constitution Avenue, NW, Room 5128
Washington, DC 20230

Dear Admiral Lautenbacher:

One year ago an international team of scientists searched China's Yangtze River for signs of the baiji, or Yangtze River dolphin, and failed to find a single individual. The species is either extinct or nearly so.

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 as the result of incidental entanglement in fisheries that send much of their product to U.S. markets. The vaquita's peril has been documented by Mexican and U.S. scientists, including scientists from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Its current abundance is almost certainly only in the low 100s. Time is rapidly running out. The fundamental challenge is for responsible 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 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 an unsustainable rate. Removing gillnets from vaquita habitat is essential. Socioeconomic options include alternative fishing methods, alternative livelihoods for the fishermen, and alternative socioeconomic bases for their communities. A range of conservation efforts has been initiated, but these require additional support, resources, and commitment from higher levels of government in both Mexico and the United States.

I hope that you agree that we have a responsibility to avoid the extinction of another species at our hands and that the situation calls for swift, decisive action. You are in an important position to bring leadership to this issue. I would very much appreciate an opportunity to brief you on the current status of the vaquita and existing recovery efforts. I will be on travel until 15 November but am hoping that I might come by your office shortly

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thereafter to update you. I will ask my staff to follow this letter with a call to your office to determine a convenient time for you. Thank you in advance for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Suzanne Montgomery for". The signature is written in a cursive style.

Timothy J. Ragen, Ph.D.
Executive Director

cc: William T. Hogarth, Ph.D.
Mr. James H. Lecky
Ms. Rebecca Lent