



# Fishin' for Facts™: Vaquita

**Common names:** Vaquita (vah-kee-tah) or  
Gulf of California Harbor Porpoise

**Scientific name:** Family Phocoenidae (porpoises):  
Genus Species: Phocoena sinus



## Size

Vaquita are among the smallest whales. At 3.9 to 5 feet (1.2 to 1.5 meters) long, an average 14 year old person is as long or longer than an adult vaquita! Vaquita weigh about 65 to 121 lb (29 to 55 kg) Newborn calves are 22 to 30 inches (.6 to .8 m) long. The calf weighs a whopping 16.5 lbs (7.5 kg).

**What do they eat?** A variety of fish, squid, and crustaceans.

## Where do they live?

Vaquita only live in the shallow coastal waters in the Gulf of California.

## Vaquita Highlights

Vaquita are so cute and so rare. If you're ever in the Gulf of California, and very very lucky, you'd know it's a vaquita by its black lipstick and glasses! Vaquita have black lips, chin, and eye rings.

All the world's vaquita can be found in one area that's slightly smaller than the state of Rhode Island. This is the smallest range for any whale species... or marine mammal. [Vaquita are found in a 900 square mile area, Rhode Island is 1044 square miles.]

*Bigfoot's cousin?* Look up shy in the dictionary and you wouldn't even find a photo of a vaquita, you'd find a blank space where a photo of a vaquita should be! Unlike its show-off cousins, like spinner dolphins or humpback whales, this elusive porpoise is rarely seen. This makes it very hard for scientists to study them. According to vaquita expert, Dr. Barbara Taylor, fishermen who have lived and fished in the area their entire lives don't believe they exist.

Vaquita travel in small groups up to 3 animals. They prefer to hide and hunt close to shore in the dark muddy waters of the Colorado River Delta. They are generally found in water less than 165 feet (50 m) deep.

Females are a little bigger than males. Calves are born after a little more than a 10 month gestation. Most are born between February and April. The calves nurse for up to a year.

Vaquita probably live up to 21 years.

### Threats or Concerns

The vaquita are the most endangered whale species. There are may be 150 left in the entire world. (Sadly, the possible extinction of the \*Chinese river dolphin moved them into first place.)

Most vaquitas are killed in gillnets set for shrimp, small finfish, and sharks/ rays. Strong efforts are being made by the Mexican Government, fishermen, and others to protect both the vaquita. (Read what you can do in Dr. Taylor's interview).

\*During a recent effort to count Chinese river dolphins scientists were unable to find any

Discover more about the fascinating vaquita, read Dr. Barbara Taylor's interview

Learn more about ocean animals at **WhaleTimes:**  
[www.whaletimes.org](http://www.whaletimes.org)

\*\*A special thanks to Dr. Barbara Taylor for allowing us use of her beautiful artwork so you can see this shy and important whale. ©B. Taylor All Rights Reserved.

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## Vaquita and Dr. Barbara Taylor Hagfish Day Expert Interviews

Why Hi everyone,

I shared a few of your questions – and my questions -- with Dr. Taylor Barbara, a marine biologist who studies the vaquita and other whales. She was kind enough to answer them to help us understand and appreciate this little porpoise.

Jake, the SeaDog

### Is the vaquita ugly, misunderstood, or... something else?

Vaquita are very shy. Some of the fishermen who work their whole lives right where vaquita live think they don't even exist! Conservation of these rare animals is much more difficult because they are so timid that very few people have seen them. This is sad because they are the most beautiful porpoise...a shy beauty.

### Why is the vaquita the perfect representative for Hagfish Day? Why should it win the ugly-beauty contest?

Few people have heard of vaquita because they are so shy they are almost invisible. Like ugliness, shyness makes it harder for us to appreciate them. They should win the ugly-beauty contest because invisibility makes them more likely to go extinct and winners are more visible.

### Why is the vaquita special?

Vaquita are the smallest porpoise (or whale of any kind) and live in the smallest area. Porpoise usually live in cold water but vaquita live next to cactus in some



of the warmest waters in the world and far away from any other porpoise.

### Why is a vaquita cooler than a killer whale?

Vaquita find their food in complete darkness. This beautiful animal lives in a world

of dark muddy water. One vaquita researcher dove down to where vaquita hunt fish and couldn't see his hand in front of his face...at noon...in sunny Mexico!

Like other toothed whale, they use echolocation (very high clicks, like bats only even higher), to find small fishes. Even though other dolphins, like the killer whale, live in the same area, they can't find food in the muddy waters of the Colorado River delta.

They're also cool because they're the smallest marine porpoise or dolphin. They are bite sized for a killer whale or great white shark but manage to live near them by being sneaky in the dark muddy waters.



whales from somewhere like Hawaii where clear water and bold whales makes it easy to capture great photographs. Most people don't know that it is accidental deaths in fishing nets that is the biggest problem in the world for dolphins and porpoises. However, people have more sympathy for the fishermen, who are just trying to feed their families. It's easier to choose sides or create an emotional appeal when the story is about whaling companies that travel thousands of miles to make a profit off killing whales.

**Is it really the most endangered whale species? How many are left? Why?**

Only about 150 vaquita are left, making it the most endangered of any whale, dolphin or porpoise. They are killed accidentally in fishing nets. The only place vaquita have ever lived also happens to have lots of shrimp and fish. Because they are surrounded by desert, fishing is a good way for local people to make a living.

**Why aren't there many photographs of them or their whole body?**

In addition to being bashful, they live in muddy water. It is really hard to get close to a vaquita. They avoid loud noise including motor boats. You have to just

**I watch every whale documentary, read every kid's book on whales, so why have I never heard of vaquitas?**

Vaquita are tiny and timid which makes it difficult to compete with photogenic giants like humpback whales. Until last year we didn't have any good photos or videos of vaquita. Even now it is hard to see the whole vaquita because the water isn't clear. Unlike photos of



sit quietly in the water and hope one of these rare animals happens to swim by. Even then, you'll probably just see its back above the water because the water is muddy.

**What is the most amazing thing about vaquitas?**

The most amazing thing about vaquitas is finding a porpoise living beside cactus! When I think of porpoises I think of



none wear lipstick. It does make them special... maybe that helps if you're shy.

**How long have you been studying vaquitas? Do you study them from shore or on a boat?**

I've been studying vaquitas for 18 years. Vaquita don't often come close to shore, so we study them from a boat. Just recently we've found we can study them using their clicks. We have recorders we can leave out for months that record when they

are there. Because you can only see vaquita when the sea is calm as glass, the recorders allow us to learn more about vaquita because we can tell when they are there even when the weather is bad.

Alaska...cold water. Vaquitas' nearest relative lives in the cold waters off Peru. You have to wonder about their story. How did they get to Mexico and why is their home so small compared with other porpoises?

**Does it play (or have any interesting behaviors)?**

All porpoises love to play but we don't often get to see it. Finless porpoises in an aquarium in China play all day long. They blow bubbles out their blowhole and catch them in their mouth. They like to follow your hand when you move it on windows. Unfortunately, we can't see this when they live in muddy waters very often. I watched a porpoise zoom up to a gull and tug on its leg several times. I thought it was funny.

**What color is its stomach? Why does it have lipstick?**

Vaquita have white bellies that shade to a silvery gray back. Vaquita have dark rings around their eyes that may help them work with other vaquita in herding schools of fish. Several other porpoise have similar eye patches but

**Your vaquita paintings are beautiful. Does painting help you understand them, express yourself, teach others....?**

Thank you. Working with endangered species can sometimes be pretty discouraging. I was on the survey where we found zero Chinese River Dolphins and concluded that this species that has been on planet Earth for 20 million years is probably extinct. Doing artwork reminds you of how special and beautiful these animals are and how they need some humans to fight for their cause... especially the shy ones like vaquita.

I hope people learn that vaquita exist and need our help and can connect with them through paintings. I've done block prints, watercolor, acrylic paintings and even some vaquita jewelry and wine labels!

### How can I help the vaquita?

I wish there was an easy answer! Vaquita can be saved by getting fishing nets out of their waters. Sounds simple. But the fishermen need a way to make a living. The Mexican government is trying to help by buying out the fishermen and finding different ways to catch shrimp and fish without the nets. This is a hard time, with jobs going away and people traveling less, to make conservation actions continue. The best we can do now is support Mexico to try to save their only porpoise. We need to let our friends know how close vaquita are to extinction and let Mexico know that we care.

Nowadays we have a very powerful communication tool with the internet. Used



in a responsible way it can build miracles. Organize with your school or neighborhood partners, with the help of your parents, to send (respectful) letters and drawings expressing how you feel about the vaquita to the Mexican Government at all levels. Sharing that you care about vaquita can serve as an incentive to keep the Government in action to recover this magnificent species.

Learn more about ocean animals at  
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