OPERATION MILAGRO
PROTECTING THE VAQUITA 2023
In 2022, Sea Shepherd’s Operation Milagro resulted in a 79% reduction in the illegal fishing activity that has brought the Vaquita Porpoise to the edge of extinction. Sea Shepherd kicked off 2023 with a new ship designed specifically for the Vaquita protection campaign. Our goal for 2023 is zero nets, a 100% reduction in illegal fishing activity.
The Vaquita is an endemic species that exists only in Mexico’s Upper Gulf of California. It is the most endangered marine mammal in the world. This is due entirely to illegal fishing nets that ensnare and kill the Vaquita. The illegal nets are used by poachers and cartels to fish principally for Totoaba, whose swim bladder, called the cocaine of the sea, fetches exorbitant fees in Asia’s black market.

Preventing the extinction of the Vaquita is Sea Shepherd Conservation Society’s (SSCS) top priority. This campaign is called Operation Milagro (Miracle) and is now in its ninth year. Sea Shepherd collaborates with the members of the Intergovernmental Group of Mexico, specifically SEMAR the Mexican Navy, our direct partners in the Zero Tolerance Area (ZTA) of the Vaquita Refuge. Together, we prevent, detect, and remove illegal fishing gear from entering the ZTA – a UNESCO-recognized and federally protected area, in which gillnet fishing is banned. SSCS’s fleet has removed over 1,200 pieces of illegal fishing gear from the refuge to date, giving the Vaquita a fighting chance at survival as well as defending the threatened Totoaba.

“There is much gratitude, on the part of the Mexican Navy SEMAR, for the work that Sea Shepherd does, in coordination with the marine authorities.”

- Vice Admiral Luis Javier Robinson Portillo Villanueva, Mexican Navy
In 2022, Sea Shepherd’s relentless efforts to protect the Vaquita resulted in a 79% reduction in illegal fishing activity in the ZTA of the Vaquita Refuge. Sea Shepherd has scaled from reacting to individual illegal nets to preventing hundreds of nets from entering the ZTA. Sea Shepherd has purchased, re-fitted and deployed a new ship as of January 2023.

In October and November of 2021, a team of leading Vaquita researchers on board the SSCS vessel M/V Sharpie and the Museo de la Ballena’s M/V Narval conducted a scientific survey to confirm the presence of Vaquita in the Zero Tolerance Area (ZTA). The scientists on board made eight Vaquita sightings over five days, estimating seven to eight adults exist and perhaps most importantly, one to two Vaquita calves.

Early in 2022, Sea Shepherd and the Mexican Navy began a new aggressive, on the water protocol in the ZTA. This enhanced protocol covers a high-priority area within the Vaquita Refuge covering over 225 square kilometers. This enhanced protocol led to the substantial reduction in the number of fishing vessels and illegal nets in the ZTA.

In April of 2022, a delegation from Sea Shepherd and leadership from the Mexican Navy’s Second Region toured each other’s ships. The Sea Shepherd delegation hosted Commandante José Carlos Tinoco Castrejón, Commander of San Felipe’s Navy Sector, on the M/V John Paul DeJoria, where Sea Shepherd demonstrated the monitoring and reporting protocols used to detect and respond to illegal fishing. The Sea Shepherd delegation also met with Secretary of the Mexican Navy José Rafael Ojeda Durán, updating the Secretary on the Operation Milagro partnership and the positive impact witnessed in the ZTA since the implementation of the new protocol.
Over the summer of 2022 Sea Shepherd purchased and began the refit of the M/V Seahorse for its new mission. Sea Shepherd chose this ship specifically for service in the ZTA and its ability to stay in place through inclement weather. Upgrades include one of the world's most sophisticated sonar systems, six cameras including night cameras that record 24 hours a day, special extra powerful radar that records for 24 hours a day, one million pound ballast system that allows the vessel to stay on duty in the ZTA long term, a 100,000 gallon fuel tank, specialized drone capacity for comprehensive real-time data collection and a new high speed internet and satellite system for global distribution of data.

In September 2022, while the Seahorse continued its refit, Sea Shepherd's legendary M/V Farley Mowat entered the ZTA in the Vaquita Refuge, officially beginning our ninth year of Operation Milagro. This is the earliest in the fishing season we ever mobilized one of our ships, and the jump start reflects our growing partnership with Mexico as well as our determination to protect the Vaquita.
By the end of 2022, collected data showed that illegal fishing activity in the Vaquita Refuge's Zero Tolerance Area has been reduced by 79% in 2022 compared to 2021.

From October to December 2021, Sea Shepherd crews observed a total of 449 hours of illegal fishing activity in the Zero Tolerance Area of the Vaquita Refuge (defined as the number of fishing vessels multiplied by the time they spent in the ZTA). This data showed a daily average of 26.41 hours of illegal fishing activity every day being confirmed and responded to in the ZTA.

Comparatively during that same period of time in 2022, a total of 164 hours of illegal activity was detected with a daily average of 7.45 hours of illegal fishing in the ZTA. Sea Shepherd’s presence in the region and our partnership with the Government of Mexico is responsible for a 79% reduction in the total hours of illegal fishing, the nets of which are a direct threat to the Vaquita.

The Seahorse officially engaged in Operation Milagro on January 24th, 2023. The occasion was marked by a ceremonial event with the Mexican Navy.
Most recently, in February 2023, Cetacean Action Treasury’s Executive Director Kristin Nowell released a report which provides further evidence of a reduction in the illegal fishing activity that threatens the Vaquita Porpoise.

See the full report [HERE](#).

This report validates Sea Shepherd’s ongoing campaign to save the world’s most endangered marine mammal. 2022 ended with Sea Shepherd’s Operation Milagro reporting a 79% reduction in total hours of illegal fishing activity in the Vaquita Refuge’s Zero Tolerance Area (ZTA) that has brought the Vaquita to the edge of extinction. 2023 began with Sea Shepherd and the Mexican Government welcoming a new Sea Shepherd ship into Operation Milagro. The M/V Seahorse was re-fitted with cutting-edge radar, sonar, and data collection capacities all designed specifically for the campaign to defend the Vaquita.
Looking forward

Our goal is **Zero**.

**Zero** nets.

**Zero** threats to the Vaquita.

**Zero** placements of illegal fishing gear.

Sea Shepherd will not rest until the 79% reduction in illegal fishing activity we achieved in 2022 reaches a 100% reduction. Even when the Vaquita population can thrive in the refuge, with no risk of deadly entanglement in illegal fishing gear, our mission on the water is and will be to serve as permanent guardians of the Vaquita.

“Protecting the Vaquita porpoise is a top priority of the Government of Mexico. We are delighted to herald a new chapter in this joint effort and thank Sea Shepherd for its longstanding partnership.”

- Esteban Moctezuma, Mexico’s Ambassador to the US
Videos

Protecting Marine Wildlife

The Seahorse Has Arrived in Operation Milagro

Saving the Vaquita from Extinction

Protecting Marine Wildlife in the Upper Gulf of California
Mexico, NGO double down on efforts to protect world's smallest porpoise

Conservation group believes new ship will help keep nets out of vaquita habitat

Mexican Navy Welcomes Seahorse To Operation Milagro

New ship Seahorse to help save near-extinct vaquita

Less illegal gillnetting and more evidence of vaquita survival