"How Can We Keep the Endangered Vaquita from Vanishing?"
Excerpt Transcript

Excerpt from (August 5, 2016) episode of Science Friday.

IRA FLATOW	Now it's time to play good thing, bad thing. Because every story has a flip side. The vaquita. You ever heard of it? It's one of the smallest and rarest cetacean species. This small porpoise is only found in the northern part of the Gulf of Mexico, right off the coast of Mexico-- Gulf of California, right off the coast of Mexico. And scientists estimate there are just 60, I'm saying six-o, 60 vaquitas out there in the wild. That's total. Vaquitas have been swept up in the nets of poachers, fishing for another endangered fish, the totoba. With such an extreme crisis, researchers are floating the idea of a risky conservation strategy. One that involves capturing and placing some of the vaquitas in enclosures out there in the Gulf. A similar strategy worked for the California condor, but will it work for the vaquita. Barbara Taylor has surveyed the vaquitas out in the wild as a conservation biologist at NOAA's Southwest Fishery Science Center in La Jolla. She's here to take us-- lead us through the good and bad of this strategy. Welcome to Science Friday.
BARBARA TAYLOR	Thank you very much.
FLATOW	You would keep the vaquitas in the Gulf, where they are endangered, right? How would-- describe what that strategy would be like, how you capture them and keep them in one place.
TAYLOR	Well, there's a lot of uncertainty to the capturing and keeping them in one place. Vaquitas are very secretive, shy animals, and in 64 days of surveying last year, we only had 28 sightings. So they're hard to find, and they avoid boats. So capturing them by running a net around them would be extremely difficult. And then we don't know how the animals are going to react to being handled. Some porpoises do OK, and other species go into shock. So there's a lot of uncertainties.

	And then there's the non-trivial issue of setting up a pen in a sometimes very violent part of the sea. And being-- making sure that they aren't more at risk in one of these pens in a hurricane than they would have been out in the wild.
FLATOW	Well that sounds like all the bad things about this. There's got to be a good side, like if you don't capture them, they're going to become extinct.
TAYLOR	So the reason that they are even closer to extinction than ever before, as you mentioned, is because of this illegal activity, where they set these gill nets, with no surface markings, to catch this big fish. And it means that we have lost 80% of the species in only four years. So there's a tremendous amount of ongoing dangers and despite heroic efforts by the government of Mexico to ban gill nets of legal fishing, the illegal fishing is still an enormous threat. And it isn't contained yet. And so the recovery team thought, it's better to have some than none. And I was on a survey in 2006 to find the last of the Yangtze River dolphins and take them into Oxbow Lake to protect them. And we were too late. We lost a species that's been here for 35 million years, and that had a profound effect on all of us, on the recovery team for what then became the most endangered marine mammal in the world. And we have had a lot of discussions on whether or not taking some action to take some vaquitas into captivity would detract from the plan A, which is getting the gill nets out of the Gulf. And so, we've been very concerned that it will be a bad thing by detracting from what has to happen, and that's getting gill nets out of the Gulf. And it's a real dangerous situation in that regard, but we all agree that if we don't take some steps now to learn whether or not it's feasible to save vaquitas, that that door will be closed and we'll have fewer options for saving the species.
FLATOW	So you will be giving this a try?
TAYLOR	They're taking the first steps. Seeing whether we can find them. Seeing whether you can put a floating pen out there and have it be a safe environment. So it's a very thoughtful step by step plan, and if any one of those steps fails, then it's simply not feasible. And the other important thing to communicate is that this isn't like condors. We can't go out and simply round up the last 60 and take them into an environment where we know that

	we can be successful, the way they could with condors. No matter what we do, it's going to take time, and most of the individuals are going to still be out there in their natural habitat where they should be, but where these dangerous nets are still not fully under control.
FLATOW	Right. Thank you very much for taking time to be with us today. Barbara Taylor, a conservation biologist at NOAA's Southwest Fisheries Science Center in La Jolla, California.