

# SEA OF SHADOWS

THE CARTELS, THE BLACK MARKET, AND THE FIGHT TO SAVE A SPECIES

**IMPACT CAMPAIGN CASE STUDY**



DOCUMENTARY  
FILMS





"A HEART-GRABBING EXPOSÉ"

VARIETY



AMBULANTE  
GIRADEDOCUMENTALES



HKIFF43

OFFICIAL SELECTION

International  
HK Film Festival

OFFICIAL  
SELECTION

CPH:DOX

2019



EarthxFilm

OFFICIAL SELECTION  
2019



AUDIENCE CHOICE AWARD 2019

sundance

film festival

OFFICIAL SELECTION

hotdocs

2019 OUTSPOKEN. OUTSTANDING.

"URGENT AND SUSPENSEFUL"

THE  
Hollywood  
REPORTER



JACKSON  
WILD

WINNER  
2019



CINEMA  
PLANETA

International Environmental  
Film Festival of Mexico

DOCLANDS

OFFICIAL SELECTION  
2019



AFI  
DOCS

OFFICIAL  
SELECTION

## AN AWARD-WINNING ECO THRILLER

A looming disaster in one of the most spectacular environments on Earth sparks a rescue mission unlike any other in **SEA OF SHADOWS**, a riveting new documentary with the intensity of a Hollywood thriller from National Geographic Documentary Films and winner of the Sundance audience award.

When Mexican drug cartels and Chinese traffickers join forces to poach the rare totoaba fish in the Sea of Cortez, their deadly methods threaten to destroy virtually all marine life in the region, including the most elusive and endangered whale species on Earth, the vaquita porpoise.

SEA OF SHADOWS follows a team of brilliant scientists, high-tech conservationists, investigative journalists and courageous undercover agents as well as the Mexican Navy as they put their lives on the line to save the last remaining vaquitas and bring the vicious international crime syndicate to justice.



# PROJECT CONTEXT



## Assessing The Landscape

The vaquita marina is the most endangered marine mammal in the world. With a population estimated at fewer than 30 when filming began, the conservation crisis was already critical, but the landscape of the problem and the solutions were complex, and a successful film and impact strategy required nuanced understanding of the many factors at play.

### CONSERVATION CRISIS

The vaquita occupies a small region of the very northern reaches of the Sea of Cortez nestled between the Baja peninsula and mainland Mexico where the Colorado River empties into the Gulf of California. The area where the vaquita is found is a UNESCO Marine World Heritage Site and a designated refuge where traditional gillnet fishing is banned. But enforcement of the fishing ban has been nonexistent, and the population of vaquita has rapidly declined. Illegal fishing for the endangered totoaba fish is a primary source of income for rural

communities along the gulf where little opportunity for alternative livelihoods exists. The vaquita is being driven to extinction as bycatch in illegal gillnets set out for totoaba. The swim bladder of totoaba is trafficked to China, where it can sell for upwards of \$100k. Ounce for ounce, totoaba bladder is more valuable than gold or cocaine. Consequently, drug cartels have taken over small communities along the gulf, overseeing a brutal illegal trafficking ring which exploits both wildlife and economically disadvantaged communities. In 2020 scientists believe there are fewer than 10 vaquita remaining.



### IN SITU ACTION

In 2017 Mexican and US agencies launched an ambitious joint Naval operation and science effort to capture the remaining vaquita and move them to a captive environment where they might rebuild the population. The world's leading experts in marine mammal capture and care spent months based in the small town of San Felipe but the Mexican government halted the effort when the first vaquita captured died only a few hours into captivity. With captive breeding removed as an option only the efforts of conservancy groups working on the front lines to remove illegal gillnets from the refuge stand between the vaquita and extinction. But unless the dual crises of corruption and economic instability throughout Baja can be solved, the dangerous work to remove gillnets is treating a symptom and not a cause.





## CRAFTING A STRATEGY

### IMPACT FROM PREPRODUCTION

The co-production partners behind Sea of Shadows invested in impact from the beginning. Impact producer Ru Mahoney was engaged in April of 2017 which provided ample time to work with the creative team prior to commencement of filming in September of 2017. Ru worked on location as the field producer throughout multiple shoots in Mexico, building relationships with individuals, NGOs, government agencies and key research partners who would come to be the backbone of the impact campaign's coalition of partners.



### LOCAL LEADERSHIP

The impact team for SOS embraced the perspective that no one was better positioned to inform the campaign's goals and target outcomes than the communities and agencies in Mexico. The Valverde fishermen featured in the film provided crucial introductions to respected local leaders, primarily based around Baja's co-op system of fisheries management. Building relationships with those leaders from multiple communities around the vaquita refuge helped inform our decision to make elevating the reach of local fishermen to their representatives and shifting - where possible - local power dynamics away from cartel-employed poachers and toward legal fishing authorities central goals of our broader campaign.

Museo de la Ballena, a nonprofit which employs rural fishermen to remove ghost nets and service acoustic monitoring stations for the University of Baja California, was another critical local partner, helping us bridge the gap between local and national politics. Museo founder Diego Ruiz Sabio and biologist Valeria Towns became central

players in the long-term impact strategy, helping the campaign garner support among Mexico City's VIP network of politicians and press. Combined with the significant reach of National Geographic, including its Latin America offices, the campaign was able to get decisionmakers in front of the film, fishermen, and press all at once, ensuring decisionmakers had to publicly respond to the crisis. This served to both influence the national narrative around the crisis as well as build capacity for the local fishing co-op leaders to speak directly to their representatives in a way they had not previously had the platform to do.



### SAFETY IN AN UNSAFE ECOSYSTEM

The SOS team was cognizant that it was operating in a volatile environment where corrupt authorities and cartel influences operated with little risk of consequence. The film team received death threats throughout production as well as when the film was screened to fishing communities in Baja. Strategic guidance was provided throughout filming and distribution via comprehensive risk assessment and security professionals. The field team included a former intelligence officer through Earth League International and significant precautions were taken on location to candidly communicate and minimize potential risk to characters and collaborators.

*The impact team acknowledges the responsibility that filmmakers have to embrace due diligence in pursuit of the stories we tell. We worked closely with security professionals throughout all stages of production to ensure characters, collaborators and professional personnel were empowered to make informed decisions about their wellbeing.*





# IMPACT STRATEGY



## A Holistic Approach

Sea of Shadows employed an evidence-led approach to impact through media, drawing on research in communication science, behaviour change, and subject-area literacy. Impact producer Ru Mahoney worked alongside the filmmakers and producers to bring a lens of communication best practice to characters, story arcs, and framing through a research-based **narrative strategy**. From including local heroes to humanizing the presumed villains, and from contrasting the emotional toll of science fieldwork with the adrenaline of frontline activism, lead producers at Terra Mater Factual Studios embraced a holistic approach to impact from the beginning. National Geographic Documentary Films took the strategy forward through a comprehensive campaign built around three primary pillars of activation: A **top-down strategy** aimed at decision-makers, a

**grassroots strategy** to elevate NGOs and conservancy partners, and a **public activation strategy** to empower general audiences to take action. The activations within these strategies were derived from theories of change conceived to keep the campaign focused on root causes of the crisis instead of symptoms.



## Narrative Strategy

Evidence-led storytelling strategies linked to literacy and behaviour change  
+  
Characters and story arcs framed to feed seamlessly into campaign activations  
+  
Elevating place-based stories in a global context

## Top-Down Strategy

Screenings for decision-makers at regional, national and international level  
+  
Integrated impact comms strategy between politicians and national news outlets  
+  
International working group to pressure Mexican government

## Grassroots Strategy

Events, comms and social platform cross-promotions with conservancy partners  
+  
Fundraising driven toward NGOs featured in the film to build capacity for action  
+  
Grassroots group sales and regional social engagement

## Public Activation Strategy

Rigorous social media plan aimed at recruiting participation in activations  
+  
Online calls-to-action on Change.org, postcard campaign, and screenings  
+  
Educational screening tour and discussion guide



## Narrative Strategy

*Sea of Shadows* is more than a documentary film with the trappings of a Hollywood thriller. It is a dissection of the complex interplay of politics, corruption, conservation, policy, diplomacy, economics, and power. It would have been easy to over-generalize the issues for streamlined storytelling - to cast heroic and villainous archetypes. But the SOS team worked hard to select characters and story arcs which would paint an honest and comprehensive picture of both the situation on the ground and the actions necessary to change it.

### NARRATIVE THEMES:

Wildlife trafficking framed as a global security threat.

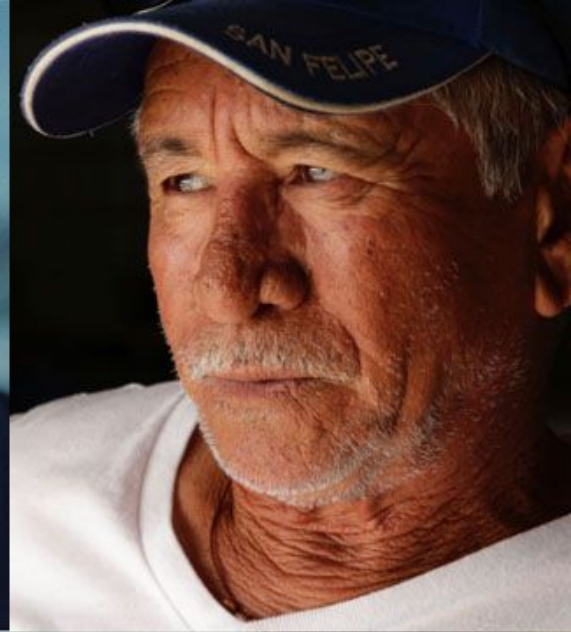
**Impact angle: Makes an environmental issue relevant to audiences uncomfortable identifying as "environmentalists."**

Unseen local consequences of sociopolitical instability and government inaction.

**Impact angle: Makes a "foreign" and highly localized story relevant in a global context.**

Conservation crises can be symptoms of systemic failures in other areas.

**Impact angle: Empowers the campaign to point to the causes and not the symptoms.**







## Top-Down Strategy

The SOS team used the production window in Mexico to establish working relationships with key government agencies, Mexico-based NGOs, and political leaders on the regional and national level. **We drew on these to strategically position the film in front of decision-makers at the state level in Baja Norte, the Senate in Mexico City, and the offices of the president and foreign affairs minister.** Coordinated efforts with our colleagues in the MX media helped us garner national coverage of both the film and crisis in top print and television outlets across Mexico specifically framed around the underlying cause of the crisis. Outside Mexico the impact team worked directly with the CITES Secretary-General, the United Nations, and the US Department of State to host screenings of the film followed by working meetings between Mexico, China and the USA to devise joint strategies to combat the crisis. Importantly, National Geographic invested in bringing rural fishermen to many of these meetings, flying them to Mexico City and La Paz to meet their senators and the

CITES Secretary-General in person. **This marked the first time fishermen on the frontlines of the vaquita refuge could work with their representatives toward meaningful solutions.**





## Grassroots Strategy

One of the core impact strategies of the film was to avoid creating new initiatives and instead leverage the momentum of the film to amplify the groups who had been - and would continue to be - leading the fight for the vaquita and the biodiversity of the Sea of Cortez. In this way the momentum of the film and the campaign would focus on building capacity for the movement long after the filmmakers, distributor, and impact producer had moved on to other projects. We focused our grassroots strategy around the NGOs featured in the film. This included the National Marine Mammal Foundation, Sea Shepherd, and Earth League International. Additionally, we worked to elevate Museo de la Ballena, a Mexico-based NGO which was instrumental behind the scenes to the making of the film and was a leading partner on our impact strategy throughout Mexico. National Geographic

group sales extended our reach to both regional and national level conservancy partners such as the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, WWF, Ocean Conservancy, Parley, Greenpeace, Surfrider Foundation, and numerous others. The Impact Team crafted social cross-promotions with many of these groups to extend online reach.





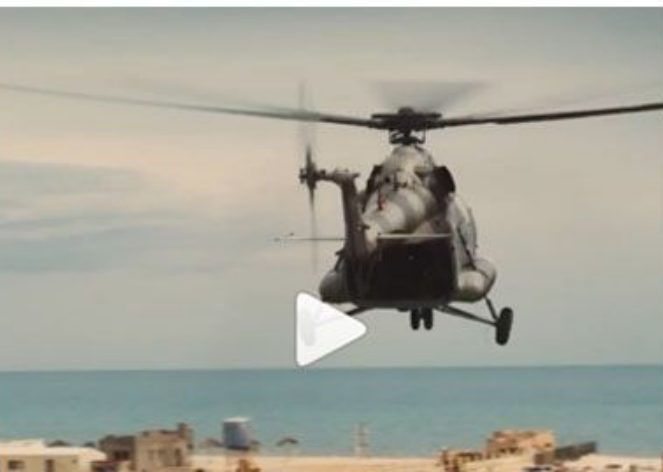
## SAVE THE VAQUITA AND SEA OF CORTEZ FROM EXTINCTION



Sea of Shadows Impact started this petition to Mexico's Minister of the Environment & Natural Resources Minister Victor Toledo - SEMARNAT

## The Call to Action:

Tell Mexico's new Minister of the Environment and the President of Mexico that they cannot let the vaquita go extinct on their



98,187 have signed. Let's get to 150,000!

Alise Ottman signed 22 hours ago

Esteban Garcia signed 3 days ago

First name

Last name

Email

Seattle, 98126  
United States

- ☒ Please share my name and email address with Sea of Shadows Impact, so that I can receive updates on this campaign and others.
- ☒ Display my name and comment on this petition

[Sign this petition](#)

leonardodicaprio • Following

leonardodicaprio Follow a team of scientists, activists, journalists, and undercover agents as they fight to save the vaquita from extinction. Watch the official trailer for @seaofshadows, a Terra Mater production in association with Appian Way. In select theaters 7/12/19. #WorldOceansDay

40w

lifeofasoul\_ THIS FILM IS NOT YET RATED.. BUT IT HAS TOUCHED OUR SOULS ! #saveourplanet

## Public Activation Strategy

National Geographic launched a comprehensive social media strategy engaging over **154k** followers across platforms. The film screened at over **100** festivals and dedicated impact events, and broadcast to **172** countries in **42** languages. The impact team worked to integrate the efforts of the many partners on the film campaign, from a dedicated social media team, to group sales, to educational engagement by Picture Motion. The online petition to the Ministry of the Environment garnered nearly **100k** signatures, amplified by multiple social media boosts from Executive Producer Leonardo DiCaprio. A postcard campaign calling for rapid action was directed to the Ministry of the Environment in Mexico, and the Mexican Embassy in America, with an estimated **10k** postcard mailings facilitated through public screenings and educational events. The film screened to more than **4k** students at **66** educational screenings on **21** campuses. And the theatrical release of the film reached **32** theaters across America including

New York City and Los Angeles. The film continues to engage public audiences through the American Film Showcase, with screenings across Mexico, Russia, Ukraine, Sri Lanka, the Maldives and beyond. The Tijuana US Consulate continues to help bring the film to the fishing communities in the region, hosting screenings and panel discussions in Tijuana, Ensenada and Mexicali in conjunction with governmental meetings for regional fishermen with more regional screenings planned in 2020. The website's Take Action page and the social presence of the film continue to be popular destinations leading audiences toward action.







**#BRACEFORIMPACT**





**36,131**  
FOLLOWERS

@SeaofShadowsSOS



**19.3K**  
FOLLOWERS

@SeaofShadows



**2,104**  
FOLLOWERS

@SeaofShadowsSOS



Change.org

**98.2K**  
PETITION  
NEWSLETTER



**50+**  
THEATRES  
**4**  
COUNTRIES



**172**  
COUNTRIES  
**42**  
LANGUAGES



**3.8M**  
LIKES FOR  
**6 POSTS**  
OVER 9 MONTHS  
BY **DICAPRIO**



**100+**  
FILM FESTIVALS  
AND IMPACT  
SCREENINGS



**13**  
GOVERNMENT  
SCREENINGS  
**UN | CITES**  
**US DPT STATE**  
**INTERPOL**  
**MX SENATE**  
**US FISH & WILDLIFE**



**4K**  
STUDENT  
AUDIENCE



**NEWS MEDIA**

**THE NY TIMES**  
**NIGHTLINE**  
**THE GUARDIAN**  
**LA TIMES**  
**VARIETY**  
HOLLYWOOD REPORTER  
**DEADLINE**  
**DAILY BEAST**  
**NEW YORK POST**  
SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE  
**VOX**



2017

**SEP 2017**

Vaquita rescue operation launches from San Felipe

**DEC 2017**

Oscar Parra murders a corrupt marine in the streets of San Felipe; MX Navy admiral replaced

2018

**FEB 2018**

MX Navy operation to counter poaching in the refuge

**MAR 2018**

Violent riot in San Felipe protesting the fishing ban; 3 marines hospitalized

**JUN 2018**

Chinese nationals arrested at US border with \$4 mil in totoaba bladder

2019

**SEP 2018**

Oscar Parra is re-arrested and sent to federal prison

**MAR 2019**

-CIRVA announces fewer than 10 vaquita remain  
-China arrests additional 11 people and confiscates \$119 mil in totoaba bladder

**MAY 2019**

MX Minister of the Environment steps down

## THE WORLD

**SEP 2017**

Filming starts in San Felipe, MX

**JAN 2019**

Sea of Shadows world premiere at Sundance, Wins Audience Choice Award

**APR 2019**

-Screens at SoHo House LA, EarthX & Hot Docs  
-Selected for American Film Showcase

**JUN 2019**

Screens at Hola Mexico, Doc Edge, AFI Docs, and Climate Days FF (Austria)

## THE FILM

**APR 2017**

Ru Mahoney is engaged as Impact Producer on the film in pre-production

**MAR 2019**

Screens at CPH:DOX, Hong Kong FF, and Diagonale

**MAY 2019**

Screens at Cinema Planeta and DocAviv

## THE CAMPAIGN

**APR 2018**

Impact team joins 3-day working meeting between fishermen and regional authorities

**JUL 2018**

-In situ needs assessment indicates that alternative livelihoods is a leading priority for sociopolitical stability across rural fishing communities in Baja  
-Reframing the narrative around the vaquita crisis to highlight need for economic alternatives becomes central to the impact campaign mission

**MAR 2019**

SOS screens at United Nations in NYC

**APR 2019**

-Screens at MX Senate in CDMX, Fishermen from San Felipe and El Golfo speak directly to MX Senate  
-Screens for US Dpt of State in DC  
-Postcard campaign launch

**JUN 2019**

-Screening and Working Panel at UN w/ CITES in Geneva

**MAY 2019**

Richard Ladkani (Director) and Ru Mahoney (Impact) present MX premiere at Ambulante, Fishermen speak to standing-room only crowds and press

## THE IMPACT

**NOV 2017**

Carlos Loret confronts law enforcement with leaked document on known corrupt authorities on MX national news; Film team there to cover it

**MAY 2018**

Andrea Crosta reveals evidence of trafficking rings and corruption on national news in Mexico

**JUL 2018**

US announces embargo on MX seafood in response to vaquita crisis

**DEC 2018**

ELI turns over investigation dossier to China, China Customs arrests 16 people and confiscates \$26 mil in totoaba bladder

**FEB 2019**

DiCaprio announces Sundance award on social, 750k+ views

**APR 2019**

-2 MX Senators speak about vaquita on the senate floor, demand government action;  
- Mx Senator speaks about the film on Bloomberg News MX, highlights need for alternative livelihoods in region

**MAY 2019**

US Fish and Wildlife requests screening, Andrea Crosta and Dr. Cynthia Smith present

**JUN 2019**

DiCaprio announces premiere on social, 2.3 mil views  
-Rural fishermen attend working meetings with CITES Sec. Gen. in La Paz, Mexico



2019

**JUL 2019**

IUCN Announces updated RED List;  
9,000 new species added

**AUG 2019**

-CITES CoP18 in Geneva  
-New US Ambassador to Mexico  
takes up his post (Embassy requests  
SOS screening for him)

**SEP 2019**

Social Good Summit in NYC

2020

**DEC 2019**

Giving Tuesday;  
*SOS raises funds for  
Sea Shepherd, ELI  
and National Marine  
Mammal Foundation*

**MAR 2020**

US extends embargo on  
MX seafood in response  
to death of a vaquita in gillnet

## THE WORLD

**JUL 2019**

-Leonardo DiCaprio and Jane Goodall at LA Premiere  
-SOS opens in 32 theaters across America  
-SOS is New York Times Critic's Pick

**SEP 2019**

-Vienna premiere opened by Jane Goodall  
-Theatrical premiere in Mexico, opens in 25  
cinemas across MX  
-UK theatrical premiere  
-Screens to SBIFF Call to Action Film Festival

**NOV 2019**

-Screens at Doc NYC, SFF Doc Stories  
-Broadcast premiere on Nat Geo in 172 countries  
in 42 languages

**OCT 2019**

Screens at Bergen  
International FF,  
Morelia, SDIFF,  
and Deutsche Naturfilm

**MAR 2020**

300k+ earned media articles  
about the film and counting...

## THE FILM

**JUL 2019**

-Director Richard Ladkani publishes  
Op Ed in the LA Times  
-Character Andrea Crosta (ELI)  
publishes Op Ed in Daily Beast

**AUG 2019**

-SOS headlines  
AREI Summit  
-Paul Watson presents  
film at AREDAY Summit

**SEP 2019**

Screens to UN-Interpol  
Transnational crime agency

**NOV 2019**

SOS screens to 4k+ students at  
22 campuses with Picture Motion,  
Discussion guide with Next Gen Science  
Standards and Common Core benchmarks  
available to educators online

**OCT 2019**

SOS screens  
at Google HQ

**MAR 2020**

154k followers across  
social platforms...

## THE CAMPAIGN

**JUL 2019**

-Screens to LA World Affairs Council  
-Ru Mahoney (Impact Producer) and  
Kaitlin Yamall (Nat Geo Society) present  
SOS to Impact Media Funders (NYC)  
-DiCaprio shares trailer to Insta, 800k views

**AUG 2019**

-Ru Mahoney presents SOS to  
fishing communities around Baja  
with Tijuana US Consulate  
-CITES presents film at CoP18, working  
meetings between US, MX, and China  
-Change.org Petition reaches nearly  
100k signatures

**SEP 2019**

-DiCaprio shares trailer on Instagram,  
1 mil+ likes and shares  
-Richard Ladkani speaks at the Social  
Good Summit  
-Baja Governor attends MX premiere,  
commits to form working group w/ fishermen  
-Minister of the Environment attends MX premiere,  
Press conference with national news outlets

**OCT 2019**

-MX government sends 600 additional marines  
and 14 additional PROFEPA agents to vaquita  
refuge  
-Oversight of the vaquita refuge is moved out of  
the Ministry of Environment and into the more  
powerful Ministry of Interior

**FEB 2020**

SOS wins the Cinema  
For Peace Award (Berlin)

**MAR 2020**

American Film Showcase  
screenings in 5 countries  
and counting...

## THE IMPACT



## POWER DYNAMICS & THEORIES OF CHANGE

The SOS Impact Strategy approached key challenges by drafting theories of change to

1. define problems,
2. identify stakeholders who could influence or rectify those problems,
3. devise strategies to recruit and engage those stakeholders, and
4. determine indicators of success.

### EXAMPLE 1: Replacing The Easy Villain With A Local Hero

A key problem was a lack of incentive for rural fishermen to embrace conservation of the vaquita. With few economic alternatives among a disenfranchised population totoaba fishermen saw themselves as "Robin Hood" characters, breaking the rules to protect their own families. The looming threat of dangerous cartels further suppressed any community dialogue and even local press which might vilify totoaba fishermen or elevate voices of opposition. The SOS team determined that local fishermen - both legal and illegal - were an important stakeholder group. The story of a grandfather and

grandson who were struggling to remain on the right side of the law became central to both the film and the press/social around the campaign. Further, the inclusion of an interview with an anonymous poacher helped viewers understand that poachers - the obvious "villains" of the story - were in fact often being exploited by cartels and corrupt systems far beyond their control. Inclusion of these narratives in our film, press, and social media coverage not only helped us tell a more accurate story of a complex issue, but was critical to crafting a film and campaign that could resonate with the local community we hoped to influence, ensuring that the film authentically reflected the nuances of their struggles. The film and campaign were therefore better positioned to be an authority on the topic to both popular audiences as well as the communities featured in the film.

### SUMMARY

1. **PROBLEM:** Easily archetypal heroes and villains would further polarize local communities and fuel the "Robin Hood" personas
2. **STAKEHOLDERS:** Fishermen

3. **STRATEGIES:** Telling both sides of the "local fishermen" story in an honest and authentic way; Carrying that strategy forward into our press and social campaign

4. **INDICATORS OF SUCCESS:** Community screenings of SOS in Baja were "sold out" (attendance was free) and well received; Social posts about local characters were widely shared by local residents on Facebook and Instagram; Community-based organisations and fishermen co-ops continue to request screenings of the Spanish-language film across Baja.





## EXAMPLE 2: Reframing The National Narrative To Drive Change

Prior to the SOS film and campaign the narrative within Mexico, the USA, and China around this crisis almost exclusively focused on the issue of illegal fishing, unsustainable fisheries, and illegal trafficking of totoaba swim bladders between Mexico and China. The Impact Strategy included conducting a “landscape assessment” of the national dialogue around this issue, particularly in Mexico, and a “needs assessment” within the fishing communities featured in the films. This was done with the help of partner organizations and government agencies, including NOAA, WWF and NMMF on the US side, CEDO as a NGO in both US and Mexico, and SEMARNAT, CONAPESCA, and the University of Baja California in Mexico. This assessment helped us understand that access to alternative livelihoods in rural communities, and a corrupt system of government subsidies to fishermen banned from fishing in their home territories, were the two primary perceived barriers to engaging local communities in vaquita conservation efforts.

The SOS Impact Strategy therefore adopted ‘Reframing the National Narrative’ as a primary goal, and worked to recruit key politicians and media outlets. Shifting the narrative away from simply exposing criminals toward identifying underlying causes was integrated into press releases in Mexico City and beyond, framing of Op Eds in the USA, extensive social media content in both Spanish and English, and the language behind calls-to-action like the postcard campaign and Change.org petition.

### SUMMARY

- 1. PROBLEM:** Narrative focused on symptoms and not causes
- 2. STAKEHOLDERS:** Politicians, news media, social media influencers
- 3. STRATEGIES:** Providing platforms through events, press, and social for characters and narratives that directed attention toward the need for alternative livelihoods and a revamped subsidized compensation program for local fishermen as directly relevant to successful conservation of the vaquita
- 4. INDICATORS OF SUCCESS:** This new narrative was widely circulated in Mexico following a screening of SOS in the Mexican

Senate followed by a VIP press event in Mexico City. Senators Murat and Delgado both spoke on the Senate floor the next day calling for a revamped compensation program and investment in alternative livelihoods. Senator Murat then appeared on Bloomberg News Mexico repeating the same demands, citing the SOS film, director, and impact producer by name. In one particularly powerful moment the head of the Federal Police in Mexico stood up in a high-level screening in Mexico City and invited investigator Andrea Crosta for a private meeting the next day, promising to take decisive action. Within a week every major Mexican newspaper and television station had printed or aired stories linking vaquita conservation to a need for economic stability in Baja and an end to corruption within law enforcement and the compensation program. Within a month the president’s office announced plans to overhaul the compensation program for fishermen in the affected regions of Baja, and sent the Minister of the Environment to Baja to discuss investment in alternative livelihoods with regional leaders and fishing co-ops.





**EXAMPLE 3: Leveraging The Film To Shift Local Power Dynamics**

Elevating local fishermen was a crucial goal of the SOS Impact campaign, but not only for the purpose of amplifying local issues and reframing the national narrative. The final piece of this trifecta was to leverage the momentum of the film to shift local power dynamics away from cartel traffickers and “Robin Hood” poachers. To accomplish this the campaign invested in not only telling authentic stories of local fishermen and their struggles, but in providing a platform for local fishing leaders to tell those stories themselves to their representatives. National Geographic invested in elevating not only the two legal fishermen featured in the documentary film, but importantly extended their support to three other significant individuals. This included a sustainable fisheries co-op leader from San Felipe, one from El Golfo de Santa Clara, and a CONAPESCA officer based in San Felipe. Inclusion of these individuals was an important factor in demonstrating to our local partners that we would act on their recommendations (by investing in the leaders they had chosen), and that we wanted to leverage the film for

more than commercial gain. By empowering these local leaders to document their multiple journeys to meet with state and national decision-makers, and their trip to La Paz, Mexico to meet with the CITES Secretary General, the film helped elevate their perceived effectiveness within their own communities. In a landscape where “Robin Hood” poachers were admired because they were “accomplishing” something for their communities (i.e. bringing in jobs and infrastructure investment from cartel traffickers where the government had failed to), this was critical to shifting power away from illegal fishermen and directing it toward legal channels of community action.

**SUMMARY**

- 1. PROBLEM:** Government inaction and corruption had led to communities resorting to poachers and cartel traffickers for income and influence
- 2. STAKEHOLDERS:** Legal fishing leaders, conservancy groups, media
- 3. STRATEGIES:** Events, press, and media which elevated the social standing of recognized authorities within the legal fishing community

**4. INDICATORS OF SUCCESS:**

Throughout the course of the campaign local fishing leaders met with their regional and national representatives for the first time via film screening events and the press surrounding them. These trips were widely celebrated across social media, particularly the closed Facebook groups each fishing co-op runs and the large community Facebook groups where the most open and democratic community dialogue in these rural communities takes place. A key indicator that we were successfully shifting community sentiment away from known figureheads of the cartels came when Sunshine Rodriguez, one of most recognizable leaders in the “totoaba cartel,” posted a widely shared Live Facebook video calling on Baja communities to work together to protect the vaquita through adoption of sustainable fishing strategies. Sunshine then went on to join a regional working group led by government officials and representatives from the local Sea Shepherd chapter, a group he had previously made death threats to on the same social streaming sites.



Sunshine Antonio Rodriguez Pena was live.



Watch together with friends or with a group



Luis Albañez and 105 others

18 Comments 26 Shares 921 V







**CONCLUSION**



## BEYOND THE FILM

The vaquita remains in critical status. Avoiding extinction will require continued significant action on the part of Mexican authorities to enforce gillnet bans throughout the refuge combined with long term investment in economic stability in the region. As of spring 2020 some of the positive steps which have been taken include:

**\*Moving oversight of the refuge to the Mexican Ministry of the Interior**

**\*Adding 600 marines and 14 PROFEPA agents to patrol the refuge and enforce gillnet bans**

**\*Creating a working group ("UMA") comprised of scientists, conservancy groups (including Sea Shepherd), local fishermen, and government representatives focused on a conservation plan which now includes input from the local community**

**\*Continued visual surveys and acoustic monitoring by scientists, who have confirmed at least two vaquita mothers with calves**

## GLOBAL CONTEXT

By shining a spotlight on not only the vaquita crisis, but also the underlying causes of complex conservation challenges (e.g. geopolitics, economic stability, transnational crime, international relations) the SOS film and campaign will hopefully build capacity for critical conversations around similar environmental crises around the world. The project is available as a case study for how evidence-led strategies and coalitions of partners can be leveraged to drive action, particularly on the national and local level.

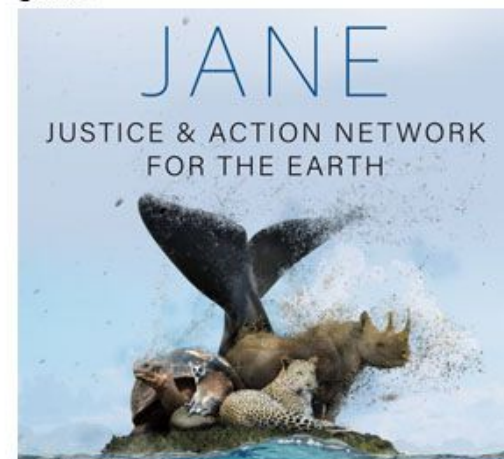
The film's tour with the American Film Showcase is poised to amplify the film's reach and extend discourse around conservation crises as often symptomatic of issues requiring action far beyond the realm of conservation and science alone. As of spring 2020 SOS is slated for AFS screenings in Mexico, Russia, Ukraine, East Timor, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives, with impact producer Ru Mahoney invited to speak about conservation as a global security threat and how impact strategies can help inform the stories we tell as filmmakers.



## CONTINUING COALITIONS

A key goal of our campaign was to help build capacity for work that would continue long after the film team had moved on to other projects. The working groups in Mexico and - through those - the continued reach of local fishermen directly to decision-makers is a key successful outcome around that goal. The US Embassy in Mexico City and US Consulate in Tijuana have continued to utilize the film through

working meetings with their Mexican counterparts. When the new US Ambassador to Mexico took up his post in August 2019 the embassy requested the film for him to screen. And finally, a less anticipated but exciting outcome is the lasting partnership between Malaika Pictures (the production company of director Richard Ladkani), Earth League International and the National Marine Mammal Foundation. Together they have launched the Justice & Action Network for the Earth (JANE) initiative to bring intelligence-driven methods and award-winning storytelling to conservation crises. The project is a finalist for the \$100million 100 & Change MacArthur grant.







**IMPACT TEAM**





## RU MAHONEY IMPACT PRODUCER

Ru Mahoney is an impact producer working primarily in the natural history and science doc space. She works with production companies and broadcasters to bring evidence-based impact strategies to the entire production process, from editorial and narrative consulting to integrated impact campaigns engaging policymakers, amplifying grassroots initiatives, and catalyzing public audiences. Her research on strategies to leverage media for increasing subject literacy, effecting behaviour change, and advancing diplomacy has been funded by the National Science Foundation, the US Department of State and international philanthropy groups.



## RICHARD LADKANI DIRECTOR

As director and cinematographer, Richard Ladkani has gained international recognition for numerous award-winning films including National Geographic's *Sea of Shadows* and NETFLIX original *The Ivory Game*. In 2015 Richard launched Malaika Pictures with a focus on producing films that shine a spotlight on the most pressing environmental and political issues of our time.



Dr. Cynthia Smith  
NMMF



Andrea Crosta  
Earth League International



Alan Valverde  
San Felipe Fisherman



Kristin Montalbano  
National Geographic



Carlos Loret  
Televisa



Jack Hutton  
Sea Shepherd



Valeria Towns  
Museo de la Ballena



Marcus Cammack  
National Geographic

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
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DOCUMENTARY  
FILMS

## PRODUCERS



**TERRA MATER**  
Factual Studios



**malaika**

[ **WILD**  **LENS** ]  
COLLECTIVE









# WHY IMPACT

An impact campaign accompanying a film or television program serves to elevate the program's narrative beyond commercial success, distribution, or total media impressions. An impact strategy leverages evidence-based tactics for deepening subject area literacy among audiences through targeted messaging, education, social media, calls to action, and events. It combines expertise in trust building, behaviour change, and engagement with traditional media marketing so that the identity of the film, or the brands of the producer or distributor, align with authentic action toward meaningful progress.

Impact is a philosophy about the paradigms behind meaningful storytelling. It is the cog sustaining momentum that moves and motivates your audience. It encompasses the expertise to identify, execute, and evaluate measurable achievements. It develops a curated coalition of partners - creatives, NGOs, government agencies, corporate sponsors, influencers, and more - to build critical mass toward trending issues, public opinion, global and local actions, and measurable change for a better world.

**RU MAHONEY | SEATTLE | CAMBRIDGE | AMSTERDAM | RUMAHONEY.COM**

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