

VAQUITA EXPEDITION 2008

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VESSEL:

CAPTAIN RODRIGO
OLSON OF THE
CORSAIR



The Corsair 24, a high performance racing trimaran sailboat.

CORSAIR REPORT

25 SEPTEMBER 2008

SHANNON RANKIN



This is the first report from the Corsair project, a team of three scientists working as part of the larger Vaquita Expedition 2008. At the request of Mexico's Instituto Nacional de Ecología (INE), Vaquita Expedition 2008 is a collaborative effort from the international scientific community to develop acoustic methods to monitor the vaquita population. The vaquita, or 'little cow', is the common name of the critically endangered Gulf of California harbor porpoise. These elusive animals make their home in the upper Gulf of California, just offshore from San Felipe, Mexico. It is currently estimated that less than 150 individuals remain due to accidental entanglement in artisanal fishing gear, making the vaquita the most endangered cetacean in the world. Vaquita Expedition 2008 is an international, three-vessel research and development study to find the best way to monitor vaquita populations over time while the government of Mexico develops a plan to remove entangling nets from the vaquita's range, compensate fishermen with alternative livelihood options, and enforce net removal.

Acoustic methods have been identified as the best monitoring strategy because vaquitas are difficult to detect visually (group size is small, they avoid noisy ships at 900 meters, and they spend little time at the surface). Currently used acoustic methods are not adequate to monitor a species as rare as vaquitas and the goal of Vaquita Expedition 2008 is to develop new and effective methods.



The spinnaker of the Corsair fills with wind.



The interior of the Corsair becomes an acoustic laboratory.

The mission of the Corsair project is to use hydrophones which are towed behind a vessel to detect sounds produced by the vaquita. These types of acoustic surveys are often conducted from sailboats, but the critical factor is wind. Typical wind conditions in the upper Gulf are too light for heavy research sailboats. Our solution: a small, lightweight racing trimaran sailboat: The *Vaquita Express*, a Corsair 24. When I approached the group of international scientists collaborating on this project with the idea of using a Corsair as a research platform, I had little idea that after only a few days on the job, we would find that the Corsair is the perfect platform for the task at hand.

The first day of our research project coincided with the start of the shrimp fishery, with scientists and fishermen excited at the prospects of a successful season. Rodrigo Olson, our captain and a former shrimp scientist, admitted his reservations at using such a small, lightweight boat for this type of work. Within a few hours of sailing, Rodrigo declared that the little boat was “perfect” for the mission. René Swift, our expert on the acoustic detection equipment we are using, is adjusting well to the heat after his recent excursions in Iceland. As for myself—I am pleased to be working on such an incredible little boat, with such a great team, and I am grateful for the chance to do my part to provide technical and scientific support and participate in international efforts to recover the vaquita.

We have not yet had time to analyze our data, but so far we have had one sighting of a humpback whale, *Megaptera noviangliae*, near Rocas Consag, and a sighting of bottlenose dolphins, *Tursiops truncatus*, off the coast north of San Felipe. The water temperature is 94° F (nearly 32° C), with air temperatures between 100-110° F during the day. The winds seem to fluctuate between 5 and 12 knots most of the time, and we are able to maintain speeds of 4-7 knots in these conditions.

Breaking news: The next report will discuss our first acoustic detections of vaquita! Stay tuned!