Asian demand for ‘cocaine of the sea’ driving illegal and unsustainable fishing

In recent years, conservationists have rung the alarm bell about the dire state of the vaquita, a small porpoise species endemic to the Gulf of California, Mexico. Multiple publications and an award-winning documentary have highlighted that vaquitas are on the verge of extinction.

Shortly after scientists discovered the species in 1950, they realized it was in trouble. Vaquitas were regularly drowning in gill nets meant for shrimp and totoabas, a large fish species whose swim bladder is considered a delicacy in East Asia. Dried swim bladders (sold as ‘fish maw’) are believed to treat fertility and circulatory problems as well as being an aphrodisiac. Fish maw commands such high prices that it has become known as the ‘cocaine of the sea’.

In 1975, after the totoaba was declared endangered, Mexico outlawed fishing for it. However, organised crime syndicates in Mexico and China have taken control of the lucrative business of totoaba swim bladder trafficking. And so fishing continues—as do the deaths of vaquitas as bycatch. By 2018 fewer than 19 were left, according to researchers’ estimates. Unless the species’ decline can be slowed, vaquitas likely will become extinct before 2021.

An issue much less reported is how the Asian market is now turning to other fish species with swim bladders that are considered suitable alternatives for totoaba swim bladders. A selection of media reports from different parts of the world shows Asian demand has far from subsided. If left unchecked, other fish species will follow the fate of the totoaba.

On the shores of East Africa’s Lake Victoria in Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania, Chinese traders are buying up Nile perch swim bladders, sparking a booming, unregulated trade which has raised concerns the Nile perch population might collapse.

In Australia too, a recent surge in Black Jewfish catches for their swim bladders has sparked fears of a stock collapse. In 18 months, the commercial catch has soared from about 20 tonnes a year to more than 140 tonnes in 2018. In response, fisheries authorities have established a quota for Black Jewfish catches. So far, however, this has not been able to stop the emergence of a thriving black market.
On the other side of the Atlantic, French-Guiana has seen the fishing of Acoupa Weakfish spike in the last five years. Local fishermen are faced with fierce competition from armed poachers from Suriname and Brazil. The Guianese fisheries association has complained about foreign fleets that are taking only the bladders and throwing back the rest of the fish because they’re less profitable. Here too, fisheries officials are concerned the population will plummet due to Asian demand for the Acoupa’s swim bladders. Local fishermen have reported Acoupa yield declines of up to 27 percent from 2018.

These media reports clearly illustrate the impact of heightened Asian demand for fish maw on certain fish species around the world. Species that are less iconic than elephants and tigers, to name a few, and therefore appear to escape the attention of the international community.

It is crucially important for governments, international organisations and NGOs to conduct further research to understand the scale and significance of the trade in fish maw. This analysis should form the basis for measures to regulate fisheries and trade and to take effective measures to reduce demand for fish species threatened by extinction.

![Figure 2 Different varieties of fish maw in a shop in Hong Kong. Photograph: Anthony Wallace/AFP/Getty Images](image-url)