The Most Critically Endangered Species Living Today and Why Humans Should Care

Madisen Kim '27

Many people are familiar with endangered species like turtles, rhinos, and red pandas; but why don't they know about Kākāpōs and Vaquitas? Kākāpōs are beautiful birds that live in New Zealand and Vaquitas are porpoises that inhabit the Gulf of California. These critically endangered species are the animals that need the most help from humans. In fact, according to the Natural History Museum and the International Fund for Animal Welfare, there are only around 244 Kākāpōs and around ten individual Vaquitas still existing in the wild, which is not only alarming but also heart-breaking. Human activity is a critical factor in the decrease in these species, with particularly harmful activities being unsustainable hunting and fishing, land clearing, and the introduction of invasive species.

Kākāpōs, in particular, underwent particularly devastating circumstances because of Polynesian settlers in New Zealand around 700 years ago. When Polynesian settlers came to New Zealand, they found the Kākāpōs as easy prey to both hunt for meat and use their feathers for clothes, like cloaks. These settlers also cleared a lot of the forest that the Kākāpō lived in to build homes and farms, destroying these birds' natural habitat for living and breeding. Although the Kākāpō were adored by Polynesian settlers and even kept as well-loved pets, they were not protected against the many threats that these settlers inflicted upon them (Natural History Museum).

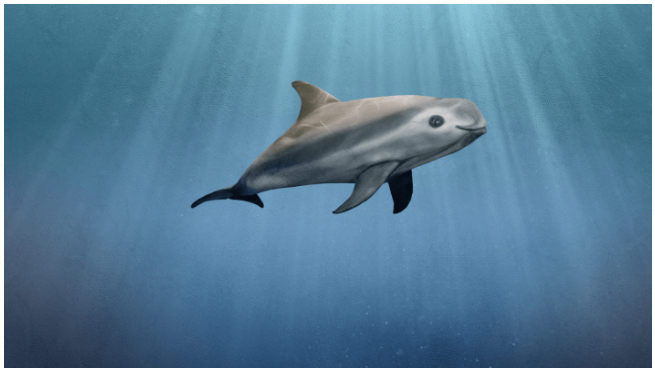
The Kākāpō is a particularly aloof species of birds, as they are the only species of parrot that cannot fly. They evolved to have forest-colored plumage to camouflage and are nocturnal to avoid predators. One interesting defense tactic they implement in the wild is that they freeze when faced with a threat, making it difficult for predators to see them from above. Although this

strategy was helpful for Kākāpō to survive against other bird species, settlers and their dogs took advantage of it. The Kakapo's tactic to freeze under threat, coupled with their inability to fly, allowed the settlers and dogs to easily hunt the birds. Additionally, the introduction of Polynesian dogs and rats, which came with the settlers, was harmful to these birds, as the rats devoured Kākāpō eggs and chicks, further reducing the population growth (Department of Conservation- New Zealand).

Later, when European settlers came to New Zealand in the early 1800s, they further diminished the Kākāpō's population. Even more land was taken from these already depleting species of birds for farming and grazing. The Europeans also introduced many new species, like possums and deer, which diminished the Kākāpō's food and resources (Department of Conservation- New Zealand). Additionally, once the Europeans learned of the beautiful Kākāpō species, they started to excessively hunt and even collect the birds for scientific research. Thousands of these birds were captured by European settlers and sent to zoos, museums, or collectors (Natural History Museum).

European scientists only realized that Kākāpō was on the brink of extinction by the late nineteenth century, and only then did people begin trying to preserve them, but with little success. However, there is still hope for these species. In 1996, the National Kākāpō Team was founded and developed a new ten-year Kākāpō Recovery Plan, equipped with increased funding and staffing. This plan includes four key goals: "maximize recruitment in the Kākāpō population, minimize the loss of genetic diversity in the Kākāpō population, secure, restore or maintain sufficient habitat to accommodate the expected increase in the Kākāpō population, and maintain public awareness and stakeholder support for Kākāpō conservation" (Department of Conservation- New Zealand).

©Deidre Vercoe



©Oceangeneration.org

Vaquitas are another species that are critically endangered, but not addressed enough. Known for their elusive nature, Vaquitas shy away from boats and human activity in the northern part of the Gulf of California, where they live. They do not have gills, so they need to come up to the surface of the ocean to breathe. However, when Vaquitas come up to breathe, they often get trapped in gill nets. Gill nets are long mesh nets that are designed for the head of the fish to fit through, but not the body. Gill net fishing is harmful because as the caught fish tries to remove its head from the net, they get caught in the mesh and can eventually drown. Scientists estimate that one in every five Vaquita are caught and drowned by gill nets. Incidental bycatch has caused vaquitas to suffer a population decline of approximately 94% between 1997 and 2016 (Earth.org).

Soon after the Vaquita's discovery in 1958, scientists became aware of the species' endangerment. In recent years, there have been conservation efforts aimed at increasing the Vaquita population. In 2005, a "Vaquita Refuge," which prohibited all commercial fishing within an area of high Vaquita population, was established and is still present today. Along with the prohibition of fishing in this area, a Species Conservation Action Plan for Vaquita (PACE-Vaqita), was also introduced to outline specific conservation efforts of these species.

However, in Mexico's fishing industry, there were some discrepancies in the plan as there

was a lack of support from local fishing communities and not much regulation for this rule. In fact, in November 2021, “scientists conducting Vaquita population counts in the Gulf reported seeing 117 fishing boats within the Vaquita refuge in the span of a single day” (Earth.org).

Both Vaquitas and Kākāpōs are beautiful species that deserve to be preserved and protected from detrimental human activities. Although these species are some of the most critically endangered species in the world, not many people are aware of the harm that they are inflicting on them. As we ponder upon the rapid threat of extinction that these species face, it is important to remember that these animals lived on Earth before us, so we should acknowledge our obligation to protect the natural world.

Works Cited

The history of Kākāpō. Department of Conservation. (n.d.). https://www.doc.govt.nz/our-work/kakapo-recovery/what-we-do/history/

New Zealand's quirky kākāpō are pulled back from the edge of extinction. Natural History Museum. (n.d.). https://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/new-zealands-quirky-kakapo-are-pulled-back-from-extinction.html

Miguelez, C. S. (2023a, March 30). *6 facts about Vaquitas, the world's most endangered cetacean earth.org*. Earth.Org. https://earth.org/vaquitas-facts/

Vaquitas: Facts, Habitat, diet, and conservation status. IFAW. (n.d.). https://www.ifaw.org/animals/vaquitas#threats