

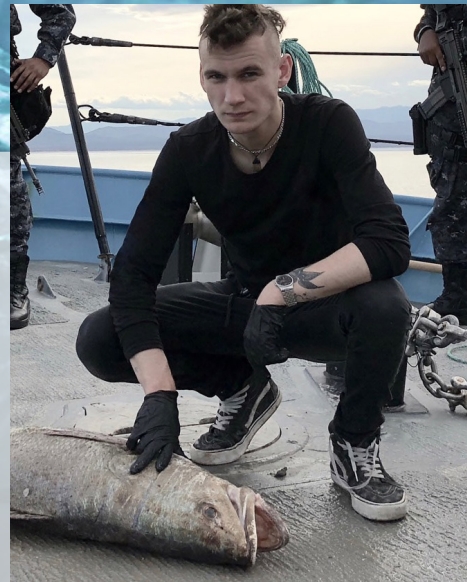
Synopsis & Goals: When Mexican cartels and Chinese traffickers come together to poach rare totoaba fish, all remaining marine life in the Sea of Cortez are threatened, particularly the critically endangered and elusive vaquita porpoise. The investigative thriller, *Sea of Shadows*, follows an extraordinary group of scientists, conservationists, investigative journalists, undercover agents, and the Mexican Navy as they risk their lives for justice. Director Richard Ladkani and his team were forward thinking in their impact goals and brought on impact producer Ru Mahoney in early pre-production. Their multi-layered impact campaign was developed using an evidence-based theory-of-change framework to save the vaquita, identify the sources of the conservation crisis, and build capacity for long-term implementation.

Case Study: Sea of Shadows

(2019) 104 minutes


Creative Design: At the beginning of the project, the film team mapped out several ways the story could go – will it be a conservation success story or will the expedition take another direction? They meticulously planned what footage each potential storyline needed for success. These early discussions empowered Mahoney to build channels to grow the impact campaign regardless of the final narrative.

The team chose to frame wildlife crime as a global security threat to better engage a diverse viewership, especially viewers less likely to consider themselves environmentalists. The investigative thriller uncovers illicit fishing practices and triggers the audience's sense of outrage. The film evokes empathy from viewers by connecting them to the perspective of a poacher trapped in the system by his debts. The team crafted a narrative that would resonate with local communities by selecting relatable, multifaceted characters and stories to accurately reflect the nuances of their struggles and the complexity of the issue. Such encounters also establish a perspective shift on where blame truly lies. The film strategically uses storytelling to link



a conservation crisis to larger systemic failures (i.e., government corruption, crime syndicates, regional poverty and lack of alternative livelihoods).

Collaborative Model: An essential element of the impact campaign was to ensure its goals carried forward even after the film team moved on to other projects. The filmmakers wanted to leverage the momentum of the film to assist groups already working on the ground to stop illegal fishing cartels. Forming partnerships was crucial in building capacity for the movement. They worked with the National Marine Mammal



Foundation, Sea Shepherd, Earth League International, Malaika Pictures, and Museo de la Ballena. These relationships also informed their decision to elevate local fishermen and investigate the role of economic power dynamics. Working with National Geographic, the film team extended their reach to conservancy partners like AZA, WWF, Ocean Conservancy, and many others. Throughout production, the team formed relationships with Mexico-based NGOs, key government agencies, and political leaders in order to later reach key decision-makers. Aware of the risks of their endeavors, the team worked with a former intelligence officer to mitigate potential danger to characters and collaborators.

Outreach Strategies: Screenings of the film were goal-oriented. With their top-down impact strategy, they targeted key decision-makers. Working with CITES, the UN, and the US Department of State, they hosted screenings and meetings with China, Mexico and the US. With National Geographic's investment, local fishermen had a platform in these meetings to tell their stories and work toward meaningful solutions.

The film screened in over 100 festivals and was shown on 21 campuses with 66 screenings. A free educational discussion guide was crafted to accompany screenings. The team launched a public call to action using a Change.org petition and postcard campaign aimed at the Ministry of the Environment

in Mexico. These outreach materials are multilingual, ensuring active international engagement. Social media promotion by executive producer Leonardo DiCaprio and conservationist Dr. Jane Goodall helped to amplify public engagement.

Measuring Impact: Winner of the Sundance Audience Award, SOS has gathered over 100K signatures on their petition for increased enforcement in the Sea of Cortez and investment in alternative livelihoods. Following a screening in the Senate of Mexico, senators cited the film as they made calls for action and investigation. The Mexican government subsequently took steps to address demands in the petition and has now passed penal code reforms along with a bill dedicated to investment in alternative livelihoods. The government deployed 600 additional marines and 14 more wildlife law enforcement agents to the vaquita refuge.

The film is a part of the US Department of State's Film Showcase, which now consults with the team in their work across the region. Scientists have since found two new vaquita calves with their mothers. Additionally, a totoaba cartel leader posted a Facebook Live video calling for vaquita protection through sustainable fishing strategies, indicating a shift in power dynamics. Partnerships between Malaika Pictures, Earth League International, the National Marine Mammal Foundation, and the Justice & Action Network for the Earth (JANE) continue to further conservation efforts through storytelling and evidence-driven impact methods.