

The northern right whale (*Eubalaena glacialis*) is the world's most endangered species of whale. At one time, 10,000 or more of these marine mammals lived in the north Atlantic Ocean. Today scientists estimate that as few as 300 survive. The northern right whale was hunted to the brink of extinction by 19th century whalers. In 1851, Herman Melville described the killing of a right whale in his epic *Moby Dick*: "...the announcement was made that a Right Whale should be captured that day, if opportunity offered." The whale got its common name from the fact that whalers considered this species the "right whale" to hunt because it swam slowly, floated when it was killed and yielded large quantities of oil and baleen (whalebone). The right whale was first protected from hunting in 1935 by a resolution adopted by the League of Nations. In 1949, the International Whaling Commission banned all harvesting of right whales. Today they are protected in the U.S. by the Endangered Species Act and the Marine Mammal Protection Act. In spite of more than 60 years of federal and international protection, the species has not recovered to a sustainable level.

Requirements for mariners

To reduce ship strikes of right whales, the U.S. Coast Guard and the National Marine Fisheries Service jointly operate a Mandatory Ship Reporting System to advise mariners about the possibility of right whales in feeding and calving areas off Massachusetts, Georgia, and Florida. Upon entry to these designated areas, all commercial vessels greater than 300 gross tons must report their name, call sign, position, course, speed, destination, and route to the Coast Guard. In return for the report, vessels receive a reply message containing information about the endangered status of the right whale, advice on how to reduce the risk of ship strikes and current right whale sighting information. The WHALESNORTH reporting area, which includes Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary and the Great South Channel, operates year-round. The WHALESSOUTH area operates only during the calving season, from November 15 through April 16. Details can be found at <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/>.

What you can do

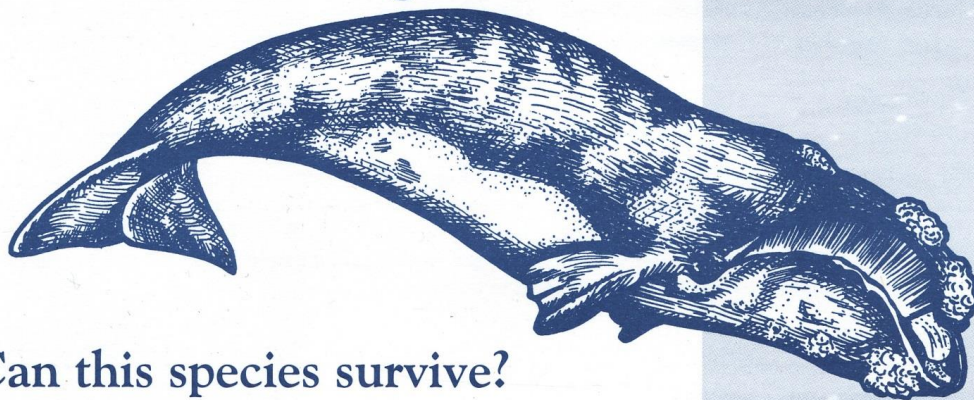
Assist the Coast Guard in helping vessels to avoid northern right whales by reporting sightings:

- ◆ In the Northeast, call the National Marine Fisheries Service Sighting Advisory System at (978) 585-8473.
- ◆ In the Southeast, call (305) 862-2850.

Report sightings of dead, struck, or entangled whales (of any kind) to the Coast Guard on VHF Channel 16.

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The Northern Right Whale



Can this species survive?

Description

Northern Right Whales are black with variable gray patches on their throats and bellies. Adult whales are 50 feet (15 m) long and weigh 50 tons (45,000 kg). The head measures approximately one-third of the body length. Right whales have no dorsal fin and have deeply notched tail flukes with smooth trailing edges. They have distinctive thick skin patches called callosities, which appear light-colored due to the presence of white whale lice. Callosities are located on the top of the head, above the eye, behind the blowholes and along the jaw. Because these callosities form unique patterns on each whale, scientists are able to track and catalog individual animals. Many whales also have distinctive scars from encounters with ships. Right whales have a divided blow hole, which produces a V-shaped blow.



Habitat

Right whales are known to inhabit five areas of the north Atlantic. Their primary calving grounds are off the coast of Georgia and Florida from Savannah to Cape Canaveral. Calves are usually born December through March. Spring feeding and nursing areas are Cape Cod Bay and Stellwagen Bank just north of Cape Cod, as well as the Great South Channel southeast of Cape Cod. These areas have all been designated critical habitats by the National Marine Fisheries Service. Right whales spend summers feeding and mating in the Bay of Fundy and off the southern coast of Nova Scotia.

Food

Right whales feed on tiny crustaceans, such as krill and copepods, ingesting more than 4,000 pounds of food per day. To catch these tiny animals, the whales swim openmouthed to allow water to pass over their baleen plates, which hang from the upper jaw and are effective strainers.

Threats

The major threats to survival of the northern right whale are collisions with ships, entanglement in fishing gear, habitat degradation and low genetic diversity. The right whale is particularly susceptible to ship collisions because of its habits of slow swimming near the surface of the water and surface skim-feeding.

Protection

Federal regulations prohibit approaching right whales within 500 yards (460 m) by either vessel or aircraft. If within the 500-yard restricted area, a vessel must steer a course away from the whale and immediately leave the area at a slow, safe speed. Certain exceptions are made for vessels engaged in whale research or in emergency situations. Vessel operators are encouraged to maintain a proper lookout for right whales, especially when transiting an area whales are known to frequent.