The North Atlantic Right Whale

What went wrong with the right whale?

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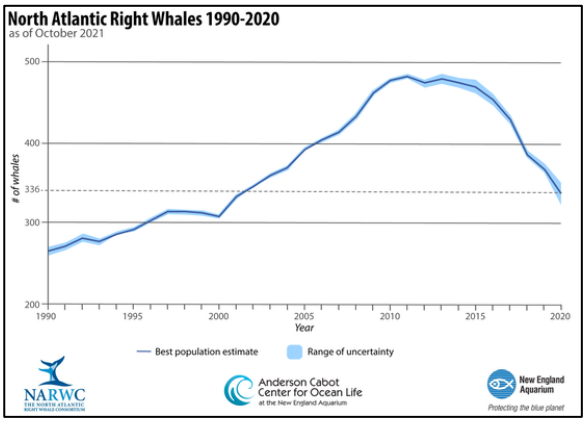
As of today, the North Atlantic right whale (*Eubalaena glacialis)* is among one of the world's most endangered large whales. Early whalers gave this marine mammal a common name because they are slow swimmers that stay near the coast, have thick blubber, and remain at the surface once killed, thus making them the 'right' whale to target when whaling. Because right whales are easy targets, commercial whaling drove this species to the brink of extinction at the beginning of the 20th century.

The North Atlantic right whale population has been slowly recovering since receiving protection from the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling in the mid 20th century. Nevertheless, their numbers began declining once again in 2010 as they face new threats. In 2010, the population estimate was 500 individuals, while recent surveys reveal that the current population is estimated to be around 360 individuals. Concerned by this decreasing population trend, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) classified the North Atlantic right whale as critically endangered in 2020. According to recent surveys, population declines are primarily attributed to boat collisions and entanglements in fishing gear.



NARWC, 2021, North Atlantic Right Whale species estimate

North Atlantic right whales migrate between northern nutrient rich areas and southern calving grounds within the North Atlantic Ocean. These large and slow mammals tend to swim near the coast where there is heavy boat traffic, making them vulnerable to collisions. Between 1997 and 2007, 52.5% of deaths were confirmed as a result of lethal strike with vessels. If not killed, many whales suffer serious injuries from vessel collisions. Several actions have recently been put forward to address this problem, including closely monitoring the movement of whales, reducing traffic in areas used during migration, and imposing speed restrictions.

Like many other marine mammals and turtles, North Atlantic right whales face a high risk of suffocation following entanglement in fishing gear, as it can prevent them from surfacing to breathe. Gear wrapped around whales may also cause serious cuts, which hinders movement, and as such, disrupts feeding and reproduction.

A study published in 2012 by Knowlton et al. revealed that out of 626 right whales (identified through photographs), 82.9% had been entangled at least once in their lives and 59.0% had been entangled more than once. Evidence of entanglement with gear used in fisheries was based on the presence of rope or netting, or scars inferred to have been caused by fishing gear. More recently, between 2017 and 2019, the deaths of 30 necropsied right whales were attributed to entanglement in fishing gear. Limiting use of certain types of fishing gear, seasonal restrictions on fishing, as well as restricted areas are current methods used to prevent critical cases of fishing gear entanglement.

In addition to government efforts, environmental groups and non-profit organizations are also working to protect this

endangered species by advocating regulation on fishing activities and boat traffic, organizing beach clean-ups to minimize plastic waste in the ocean, collecting data on the species, and raising public awareness.

Though its Marine Species at Risk Program, the Quebec-Labrador Foundation is working towards protecting and maintaining a vital marine ecosystem in the North Atlantic Ocean through a community-based approach towards conservation and stewardship. Program lead, Dr. Kathleen Blanchard works alongside the QLF team each summer to conduct surveys, work with fish harvesters, and lead educational activities on aquatic species at risk in the great Northern Peninsula of Newfoundland and southern Labrador.

NOAA, Public Domain via Wikimedia Commons

Everyone can contribute to the recovery of North Atlantic right whales by spreading awareness and sharing educational resources. Sightings of healthy, entangled, or injured, endangered whales should be reported by following instructions at Transport Canada for sightings in Canada and to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) for sightings in the U.S. Other ways to help can be by whale watching from shore and ensuring to stay far from whales when boating or fishing.

NOAA, Public Domain via Wikimedia Commons

Though it is difficult to say what the future will hold for the North Atlantic right whale, the work being done to protect these animals is encouraging and gives reason for hope for population recovery. To learn more about the North Atlantic right whale, or to look for more ways to support their protection, check out the NOAA fisheries webpage and the reading materials listed below.

Reading Materials

1. Pettis, H. M., Pace III, R. M., & Hamilton, P. K. (2021). North Atlantic right whale consortium 2020 annual report card. *Report to the North Atlantic Right Whale Consortium*. https://www.narwc.org/uploads/1/1/6/6/116623219/2021report_cardfinal.pdf

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8. Laist, D.W. (2017). *North Atlantic Right Whales*: *From Hunted Leviathan to Conservation Icon*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press., doi:10.1353/book.51236.

9. Knowlton, A. R., Hamilton, P. K., Marx, M. K., Pettis, H. M., & Kraus, S. D. (2012). Monitoring north atlantic right whale eubalaena glacialis entanglement rates: a 30 yr retrospective. *Marine Ecology Progress Series*, *466*, 293–302., doi:10.3354/meps09923.

10. Pettis, H.M., Pace, R.M. III, Schick, R.S., and Hamilton, P.K. (2020). North Atlantic Right Whale Consortium 2019 Annual Report Card. http://www.narwc.org/uploads/1/1/6/6/116623219/2019reportfinal.pdf

11. NOAA Fisheries (2022). North Atlantic Right Whale. https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/species/north-atlantic-right-whale

Photographs and Other Images

1. NARWC. 2021. North Atlantic Right Whale species estimate. https://www.narwc.org/report-cards.html

2. NOAA. 2006. North Atlantic Right Whale mother and calf. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Post0025_-_Flickr_-_NOAA_Photo_Library.jpg

3. NOAA. 2008. NOAA Fisheries: Large Whale Disentanglement Program. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Eubalaena_glacialis_with_calf.jpg