Time is Running Out:

North Atlantic Right Whales on the Brink of Extinction

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A Snapshot of North Atlantic Right Whales

By the Numbers

North Atlantic right whales were a frequent target of whalers as they are often found near shore, swim slowly, and tend to float when killed. They were aggressively hunted, and their population dropped from peak estimates of up to 21,000 to likely fewer than 100 by the 1920s. After whaling of North Atlantic right whales was banned in 1935, their population increased to as many as 483 individuals in 2010. Unfortunately, that progress has reversed. Between 2017 and March 2025, 41 North Atlantic right whales have been confirmed dead and many more have likely died as the result of human activities. Only an estimated around 370 North Atlantic right whales are alive today.

> **Scientists estimate** that even a single human-caused death of a North Atlantic right whale threatens the recovery of this species and its chances of avoiding extinction.

Where They Live

While they were once found from Bermuda to Canada, across the North Atlantic around Iceland and Norway, and as far south as the northwestern coast of Africa, today North Atlantic right whales live mostly along the east coast of the U.S. and Canada, with occasional sightings in Europe and Iceland. These whales have winter calving areas off the coast of the southeastern U.S. and summer feeding grounds in New England and eastern Canada. Climate change is placing additional stress on the population, as right whales' preferred food – tiny animals called copepods – are shifting their habitat to avoid warming waters. New regions are becoming increasingly important to the species, including the area south of New England, where these whales feed and socialize year-round.

Low Birth Rates

Female North Atlantic right whales do not reach reproductive maturity until about 10 years of age. They typically only produce one calf after a year-long pregnancy. Three years is considered a healthy interval between calves, but the trauma caused by chronic fishing gear entanglements and other stressors including boat traffic, noise pollution, and climate-related issues have now increased the calving interval to 7-10 years on average. There are only around 70 breeding females left as of 2018. The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) estimates that 20 new calves would be a productive year, but 50 or more calves per year are needed for the species to recover. Although 20 calves were born in 2024, a quarter of those newborns did not survive. Perhaps the most tragic death was the first known calf of the season from mother, Juno. The calf was struck by a boat and died a slow, painful death, succumbing to its wounds two months later. Human-caused stress and deaths are making recovery for North Atlantic right whales difficult, and deaths are still far outpacing births.

Threats

Boat strikes and entanglement in fishing gear are the two greatest threats to North Atlantic right whales. These threats kill whales or cause injuries that reduce their ability to breed, feed, grow, and reproduce. Current regulations on fishing and vessel speeds are not strong enough to protect the North Atlantic right whale from extinction.

If stronger safeguards are not swiftly adopted by the U.S. and Canadian governments, the North Atlantic right whale could be gone forever.

Fishing Gear Entanglements

Some Atlantic fisheries use traps and pots, primarily to catch lobster and crabs. This gear is placed in the water, sinks to the bottom, and is connected by rope or line to other traps or pots, as well as to buoys on the surface. North Atlantic right whales are found in the same waters as these trap and pot fisheries. North Atlantic right whales must navigate a jungle of roughly one million lines sprawled across their migration routes, including calving and feeding areas in the U.S. and Canada. Their fins, tails, bodies, and mouths can get entangled in the ropes and lines, which is one of the leading causes of right whale injury and death.

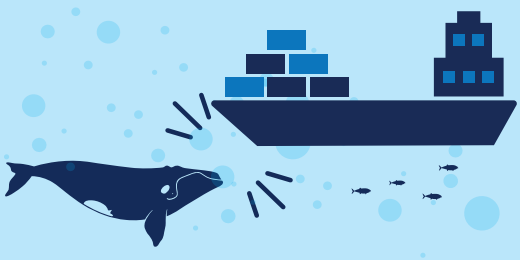
Between 2017 and March 2025, there have been ten confirmed deaths of North Atlantic right whales entangled in fishing gear and 35 confirmed serious injuries (where a whale is likely to die from the injury or illness). These ropes cut into the whales' flesh, which can lead to life-threatening infections, and are so strong that they can even cut into bone. Dragging lines attached to heavy fishing gear slows these whales down, making it difficult to swim, reproduce, and feed, and in some cases, can drown them. More than 86% of North Atlantic right whales have suffered at least one entanglement during their lifetime, with some individuals being entangled as many as eight times, and the severity of these events increasing over time.

The most effective way to reduce the risk of entanglement is to remove fishing gear when North Atlantic right whales are near the fishing grounds. With whales spending a large portion of the year in or around fishing grounds, this has an impact on the fishers in the region. But there is a solution that would allow fishers to have continued access to their fishing grounds and protect the North Atlantic right whales. Innovative gear, like on-demand or ropeless gear, functions by allowing a fisherman to send a remote signal to gear sitting on the seafloor so that it sends up a buoy or pops up to the surface upon demand, where it can be immediately retrieved. By using on-demand gear, there are no longer unattended vertical lines in the water from the trap to the buoy on the surface that can entangle whales and other ocean wildlife.

With continued investment in gear development, testing, and deployment, transitioning to on-demand gear could provide continued fishing access for fishermen while greatly reducing entanglement risk for North Atlantic right whales and other ocean wildlife. The U.S. and Canadian fisheries managers need to provide regulatory incentives and increased funding to support the transition to this whale-safe fishing gear.

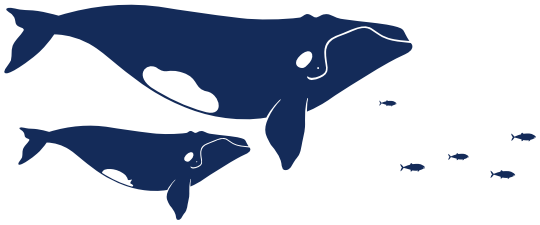
Vessel Strikes

Collisions with boats are the other leading cause of right whale deaths. North Atlantic right whales are slow, swimming around 6 miles per hour, usually near the water's surface. They are also dark-skinned and lack a dorsal fin, making them very difficult to spot, especially in unfavorable weather conditions or at night. Studies have shown that boat speed is a major factor in whale collisions and that slowing boats larger than 65 feet down to 10 knots would reduce a North Atlantic right whale's risk of death from being struck by a large vessel. At normal operating speeds, boats cannot maneuver to avoid hitting right whales, and the whales swim too slowly to be able to move out of the way. This puts right whales at great risk of strikes, which can cause deadly injuries from blunt force trauma or cuts from the propellers. Between 2017 and March 2025, there have been 15 confirmed deaths of North Atlantic right whales in the U.S. and Canada from boat strikes and three confirmed serious injuries from boat strikes.



Recommendations

The U.S. and Canada must work together to prevent North Atlantic right whales from going extinct. Oceana calls for the following actions to be taken as soon as possible by the U.S. and Canadian governments:



- Reduce the number of vertical lines used in fixed-gear fisheries in the U.S. and Canadian Atlantic waters;
- Implement effective time and area closures in fisheries such as the pot and trap fisheries to remove fishing gear when the whales are present;
- Transition to on-demand fishing gear in high-risk areas to reduce entanglements and allow fishers to continue to fish;
- Require boats 35 feet or greater and fishing vessels to use Automatic Identification System (AIS) devices to allow for better monitoring and tracking of vessels at all times;
- Update the timing and location of mandatory slow zones, include boats 35 feet or greater in the speed limits, and make compliance of speed limits mandatory in areas that are currently voluntary by the U.S. and Canadian governments; and
- Provide long-term funding and capacity building for research, monitoring, and continued risk reduction to save North Atlantic right whales.