

No Time to Lose:

Last Chance for Survival for North Atlantic Right Whales



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A Snapshot of North Atlantic Right Whales

By the Numbers

North Atlantic right whales were named for being the “right” whale to hunt because they were often found near shore, swim slowly and tend to float when killed. They were aggressively hunted, and their population drastically dropped from peak estimates of up to 21,000 to perhaps fewer than 100 by the 1920s. The League of Nations banned whaling of right whales in 1935, and their population increased to as many as 483 individuals in 2010. Unfortunately, that progress has reversed. Since 2017, 28 right whales have been confirmed dead and only around 400 animals remain.

If trends of the last decade continue, **extinction is inevitable.**

Where They're Found

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 right whales live mostly along the East Coast of the U.S. and Canada, with occasional sightings in Europe and Iceland. Climate change is placing additional stress on the population, as right whales' preferred food – tiny animals called copepods – move farther north to avoid warming waters.



Low Birth Rates

Right whales do not reach reproductive maturity until about 10 years of age. They typically only produce one calf after a year-long pregnancy every three to five years. However, the trauma caused by chronic fishing gear entanglements and other stressors has now increased the calving interval to 10 years, and fewer than 100 breeding females remain. These reproductive challenges are making recovery difficult.

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

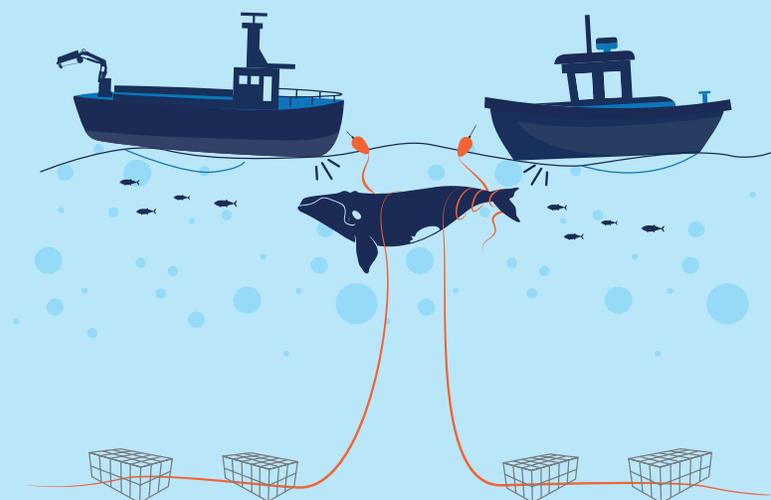


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Threats

The two greatest threats to North Atlantic right whales are entanglements in fishing gear and collisions with ships. Emerging threats like seismic airgun blasting, a process used to search for oil and gas deep below the seafloor that creates one of the loudest human-made sounds in the ocean, put the species at even greater risk.

The U.S. and Canadian governments must act swiftly to halt this catastrophic downturn. If nothing changes, we could see the first large whale go extinct in the Atlantic Ocean in centuries.



Fishing Gear Entanglements

Entanglement in fixed fishing gear used to catch lobster, snow crab and bottom-dwelling fish like halibut, flounder and cod is one of two leading causes of right whale injury and death. Fishing gear from the U.S. and Canada entangles an estimated 100 right whales each year, and about 83% of all right whales have been entangled at least once.

A jungle of roughly 1 million lines sprawls across right whale migration routes and feeding areas in the U.S. and Canada. These ropes have been seen wrapped around right whales' mouths, fins, tails and bodies. They cut into the whales' flesh, which can lead to life-threatening infections, and are so strong that they have severed fins, tails and cut into bone. Dragging lines attached to heavy fishing gear slows them down, making it difficult to swim, reproduce and feed, and in some cases, can drown them.



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Ship Strikes

Collisions with ships are the other leading cause of right whale deaths. Right whales are slow, swimming around 6 miles (9.7 km) 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 found that the speed of a vessel is a major factor in ship-related collisions with right whales. At normal operating speeds, ships cannot maneuver to avoid them, and right 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.



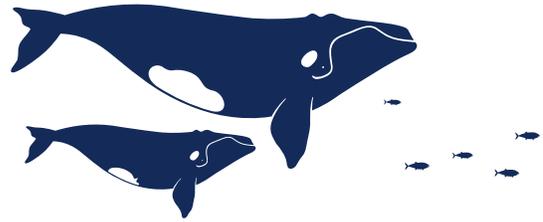
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Of the eight dead right whales found in Canada in June and July 2019, **three were determined to have died from ship strikes.**



Recommendations

The U.S. and Canada must work together to prevent these ocean giants from becoming extinct. Oceana calls for the following actions to be taken as soon as possible by the U.S. and Canadian governments:



- Reduce the amount of vertical lines used in fixed-gear fisheries in U.S. and Canadian Atlantic waters.
- Implement effective fisheries closures that remove threats to right whales when they are present.
- Modify fishing gear and practices to reduce the likelihood and severity of entanglements.
- Enhance fisheries monitoring and require public tracking of fishing vessels.
- Enact seasonal speed restrictions in areas where right whales are known to frequent and implement short-term restrictions in additional areas when they are detected.
- Provide long-term funding and capacity building for research, monitoring and risk reduction.
- Expand and strengthen response networks comprising researchers, environmental organizations, industry groups and stakeholders, and government decision-makers to help manage the crisis and start rebuilding the species.



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