

Fishery Story – The North American right whale

With fewer than 380 individuals remaining, the North American right whale is one of the world's most endangered large whale species.⁸ Imagine this: a 70-ton creature surfacing in the waters off coastal Cape Cod. But instead of breaching or waving its pectoral fin in a friendly manner, this magnificent mammal is struggling as it becomes tangled in fishing gear. This moment is not a figment of imagination, but rather a repeated occurrence that the North Atlantic right whale population faces frequently. Since the abolishment of the whaling industry, entanglement in fishing gear and vessel strikes have become the leading cause of mortality for this species.

Scientifically, the North Atlantic right whale is known as *Eubalaena glacialis*. They coined the name “right” whale as they were the “right” whales to hunt since they floated once killed. Their population never had the chance to recover from the past whaling industry, with new threats keeping their numbers drastically low. According to NOAA, approximately 380 individuals remain.⁸ The World Wildlife Fund lists them as endangered species.²

Similar to Alaskan Humpback whales, North Atlantic right whales travel to warm waters in the winter. Off the coast of New England and further north into Canadian waters, right whales are found in the spring, summer, and into the fall. As the water cools, they migrate south into the shallow coastal waters off North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida to calve. NOAA has designated two areas as critical habitats for North Atlantic right whales to protect this vulnerable species further. Since 1970, *Eubalaena glacialis* have been protected under the Endangered Species Act and the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972.

The core problem facing the North Atlantic right whale is fishing gear entanglement and vessel strikes. “Entanglement in fishing gear can cut into a whale’s body, causing serious injuries and resulting in infections and mortality”.⁸ The most common gear responsible for entanglement is lobster traps and gillnets; vertical buoy lines connect traps to the surface, which entangle right whales when they feed or migrate. NOAA estimates that 85 percent of right whales have been caught in fishing gear at least once. “Even if gear is shed or removed through disentanglement efforts, time spent entangled can severely stress a whale, weaken it, prevent it from feeding, and sap the energy it needs to swim, feed, and reproduce. Chronic entanglements are one reason scientists think female right whales are having fewer calves and taking longer to have them”.⁸ The most recent entanglement event occurred on December 10th, 2025, where a 3-year-old male right whale was found with fishing line wrapping his head and mouth, cutting into his blowhole, and embedded in his upper jaw.⁵ The whale was monitored and named [“Division” #5217](#); however, the deceased male was found floating 25 miles offshore of Avon, North Carolina, on January 27, 2026.⁶

Vessel strikes leave more intense injuries, such as broken bones, massive internal injuries, deep cuts to the skin, and even death. The faster the vessel is moving, the more intense the injury, and nearly any size can injure or kill the whale. Collisions are frequent as their habitat and migration routes overlap with shipping lanes and nearshore vessel traffic. The last reported death caused by

a vessel strike was in April of 2024, when a mother whale ([Catalog #1950](#)) was found dead off the Virginia coast.¹

The root cause of increased entanglements and vessel strikes is changing environmental conditions. Due to oceanographic changes in the Northwest Atlantic, right whales have changed their distribution patterns.³ Prey location and availability have shifted due to warming waters, leading right whales to migrate to areas with fewer protections. “Moreover, a dip in birth rates and longer calving intervals indicate that reproductively active females have struggled in recent years to find sufficient food resources to support pregnancy”.⁸ As our climate continues to change, the future of the North Atlantic right whale remains uncertain.

In addition to protection under the Endangered Species Act, the Marine Mammal Protection Act, and NOAA, numerous conservation efforts are in place to protect the North Atlantic right whale. Vessel speed restrictions have been created, such as Seasonal Management Areas along the east coast, where vessels over 65 feet must slow to 10 knots or less during whale season. Moreover, a mandatory vessel reporting system has been established, requiring vessels entering feeding areas off the U.S. northeast coast and calving areas off the U.S. southeast coast to report to a shore-based station. To reduce entanglement, seasonal closures have been implemented, requiring weak inserts or weak rope in fixed gear, fewer vertical buoy lines in trap/pot fisheries, and sinking ground line rather than floating between trap/pots and gillnet anchoring systems.⁴ The Atlantic Large Whale Take Reduction Team is a group of fishermen, scientists, conservationists, and state and federal officials who are working together to protect and recover the North Atlantic right whale population.⁷ A recovery plan has also been developed by NOAA, as required under the Endangered Species Act.⁴

Right whales are a symbol of ocean health. The declining population shows that climate change and human activity have substantial and real impacts on the species that roam Earth. Fishery sustainability is important in protecting all species, not just the target ones. Because nontarget species have just as much of a role in our ecosystems as target species do. They are crucial to the biodiversity and health of these environments. This is not just a whale issue; it is about how we manage our shared ocean space. The efforts to conserve right whales show us that people care and that there is hope for all endangered species. The future of the North Atlantic right whale may depend on whether we can redesign our relationship with the ocean itself.

Bibliography

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