

The Endangered Right Whale

By

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An amazing gentle giant passes by Long Island on its migration path from its habitat off the coast of Georgia and Florida to its mating grounds in the Bay of Fundy. We are privileged share the ocean with the Right Whale. However, if we are not careful we may soon lose that privilege. Of all the large whales, it is the most endangered species with estimates of approximately 300 right whales remaining in the North Atlantic.

At least 10,000 and perhaps as many as 50,000 right whales used to live in the North Atlantic Ocean. Hunting the right whale began in the Bay of Biscay about 1200 CE. The first whalers found the large cetaceans in the shallows close to shore. The whale had a high blubber content and the baleen was highly sought after. Whalers termed this whale as the right whale to hunt because it moves slowly, migrates close in to shore and stays afloat after it is killed. The name has nothing to do with direction. By the year 1500 the European Right Whale population was wiped out. Extensive hunting for more than 800 years has brought the right whale to the very brink of extinction. In 1935 the Right Whale was the first whale species to come under international protection. It is still protected by a number of international laws and treaties. Despite the efforts of the international community, the Right Whale population continues to decline. The reasons for the continued reduction in population include pollution, collisions with ships, shrinking environment and in-breeding due to the small numbers in the reproduction pool.

Adult right whales are medium sized, 45-55 feet long (14-17 meters); calves are 15-20 feet long (4.5-6 meters) and are rarely sighted without their mothers. Right whales have distinctive "V-shaped" blows, no dorsal fin, short and broad flippers, and deeply notched tail flukes with smooth trailing edges. They have black skin with rough patches (or callosities) on their heads. The right whales have baleen plates that hang down from the upper jaw and help them strain their food from the water as they swim. The diet of these huge sea creatures consists of some of the smallest creatures in the ocean. Right whales eat krill and copepods, small invertebrates that swim close the surface. It is not unusual for a right whale to consume as much as three tons of these small sea creatures in a single day. Variations in the amount and location of their food source will determine where the whales can be found year to year. Scientists believe that the right whale fasts during the winter months.

In autumn, a portion of the female right whale population migrates to the warmer, shallow coastal waters of the southeastern United States to give birth to their calves. Because of the need to protect the mothers and young, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) designated an area off the Georgia and Florida coasts as a critical habitat and winter calving ground and nursery area for the migratory whales.

Right whales suffer from encounters with ships and from getting entangled in fishing gear. Vessel encounters resulted in nearly 30% of all known right whale deaths between 1970 and 1994. Fishing gear such as deep water lobster trap lines and fishing nets and ropes can entrap or entangle these gentle giants. It doesn't take much effort and only a very short time to drown a right whale. Nearly 60% of the current right whale population show scars that are believe to have been caused by encounters with fishing gear of one sort or another.

A partnership to protect the right whale has been formed between a Federal Agencies including, National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), Fish and Wildlife Service, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Minerals Management Service, Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Army Corps of Engineers, National Ocean Service-Office of Ocean and Coastal Resources Management, the U. S. Coast Guard, and the U. S. Navy.

Right whales share our waters and because of their size, slow speed, and habit of swimming just below the surface will run afoul of our boats. Whales are amazing creatures to observe in the wild and attract a lot of people to go whale watching. It would seem reasonable that we would take precautions to avoid injuring or frightening these outstanding members of our wildlife, but it has become necessary for Federal laws to be enacted to protect whales. All whales, dolphins and porpoises are federally protected by the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA). Most large whales, including the Right Whale, are protected under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Under these laws, it is illegal to harass, hunt, capture, or kill any marine mammal. Prohibited conduct also includes any negligent or intentional act, which results in the disturbing or molesting of marine animals. The Right Whale is protected by State and Federal regulations that prohibit coming closer than 500 yards. Any vessel that finds itself within the 500-yard buffer zone created by a surfacing Right Whale must immediately steer clear at a safe slow speed. The Federal Government has established security zones for the protection of sea mammals. In our part of the country Federal law has established the Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary and has designated as critical habitats Cape Cod Bay and Great South Channel. The exact coordinates of the critical habitat zones established for the protection of whales is published in every issue of the U. S. Coast Guard First District Local Notice to Mariners. Violators of the MMPA or the ESA can be fined up to \$10,000 or receive criminal

penalties of up to \$20,000 plus imprisonment and/or seizure of the vessel and its contents. You can access the USCG First District Local Notice to Mariners at: <http://www.navcen.uscg.gov/lnm/d1/>

If Right Whales are on the surface, you may observe them by following a few simple rules. From two miles to one mile away reduce speed to 13 knots, or less. Post a dedicated lookout to monitor the location of the whales and avoid sudden changes in speed or direction. From one mile to one-half mile away reduce speed to 10 knots or less and maintain the dedicated lookout. From one-half mile to 500 yards reduce speed to 7 knots or less, maneuver to avoid a head-on approach, and do not go closer than 500 yards. At all times avoid a course that will put you on a head on course to the whale. When you leave the whales depart by following the procedures detailed above. Intentional close approach to a Right Whale is prohibited and may result in prosecution under Federal and State laws. You should take every precaution to avoid being near the whales after dark. It is strongly recommended that you cease whale watching and begin your return to port at least 15 minutes before sunset.

Everyone should have at least one opportunity during their lifetime to actually see whales in their ocean environment. The absolute best way to go whale watching is to go on board a regularly scheduled whale-watching trip run by marine professionals. Private boaters, unless they are highly experienced and well trained, should not attempt to go whale watching. When we use the party boat approach to whale watching, we are nearly guaranteed that we will have an opportunity to see whales. A large boat on whale watching trips carries a large number of whale watchers which helps to reduce the number of vessels that would invade the whale's natural world. That will lessen the risk of injury to the whales and also diminish the stress on the whales that an invasion of powerboats could cause. To get more information on whale watching trips contact:

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Because of its rarity and the need to learn as much as possible about its migratory paths, all sightings of a Right Whale should be called in to the NMFS Sighting Advisory. The number to call is (508) 495-2264 or beeper (978) 585-8473.

If you come across a whale, any breed, that is entangled you must report that sighting. You must also maintain contact with the whale until help arrives or until you can be relieved by another vessel. Call the Disentanglement Hotline - (800) 900-3622 or call the U. S. Coast Guard on VHF Channel 16.

Any sighting of a dead whale, any species, must be reported to the Marine Mammal Stranding Network (508) 495-2090 or (978) 585-7149 (beeper).

For more information regarding whale watching or concerning the laws protecting marine mammals, you should call the National Marine Fisheries Service, Protected Resource Division - (978) 281-9254 or the Gary E. Studds/Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary - (781) 545-8026