

THE HEAT IS ON

Species feeling the effects of climate change



North Atlantic Right Whale

Eubalaena glacialis

Region:

Atlantic Ocean

Area affected:

Gulf of St. Lawrence and New England coast

Climatic change:

Warming oceans

Impact:

Mortality

ABOUT THIS SPECIES

With fewer than 340 remaining, North Atlantic right whales are critically imperiled. They are listed as “endangered” under the Endangered Species Act and are also protected under the Marine Mammal Protection Act. Right whales migrate along the Atlantic Coast from their feeding areas off Canada and northern New England to their calving range off Georgia and Florida. This whale has a stocky, black body with no dorsal fin. Adults measure 50 feet long and weigh about 70 tons. North Atlantic right whales eat up to 2,600 pounds of zooplankton per day, filtered through large baleen plates in their mouths.

DESCRIPTION OF IMPACT

The zooplankton that North Atlantic right whales depend on are found primarily in cool waters. Waters off New England and the Bay of Fundy in Canada have historically been important feeding areas. However, as the region has warmed, whales are now also foraging farther north into the Gulf of St. Lawrence and off Newfoundland, Canada, likely due to shifting prey availability. Unfortunately, this expansion in feeding range is putting them in danger, because the protections that have helped to reduce entanglement in fishing gear and collisions with large ships—the two biggest threats to right whales—are based on the whales’ historical migration patterns, not their new movements. Canada and the U.S have implemented fisheries closures and management measures, rerouted commercial shipping lanes and put speed limits into effect to help avoid vessel collisions. But with right whales now apparently traveling at times and to areas without protections, deaths are on the rise. In 2017, ship strikes or entanglements caused the deaths of 12 North Atlantic right whales in the Gulf of St. Lawrence and five in U.S. waters. This began an Unusual Mortality Event that has continued through 2022 with 51 observed mortalities to date. **The right whale population has declined by 20% since 2010, an unsustainably high level of mortality for such a small population.** Not much time is left to save the North Atlantic right whale from extinction. Both Canada and the U.S. must act together to reduce vessel collisions and entanglements.

References

Defenders of Wildlife. Basic Facts about Right Whales. <https://defenders.org/north-atlantic-right-whale/basic-facts>

Friedlander, B. 2017. Climate change, sparse policies endanger right whale population. *Cornell Chronicle*. November 3. <http://news.cornell.edu/stories/2017/11/climate-change-sparse-policies-endanger-right-whale-population>



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