

# RIGHT WHALE NEWS

*An independent forum for right whale conservation and recovery,  
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## **18 Calves and Counting: Mid-Season Report from the SEUS Calving Area**

*Contributed by Katie Jackson (Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission)*

More than halfway through the 2010-2011 calving season, there is still speculation about the final outcome. Will we find more mother/calf pairs? How many more individual whales could we document? Will we have more entangled, injured, or dead animals? What will be the fate of the whales with new injuries or entanglements that we have already documented? What will the weather be like? To date, 292 whale alerts to mariners have been disseminated and approximately 80% of these sightings have been off the coast of Florida. Unseasonably cold temperatures in December and early January have given way to warm temperatures in February. After holding at 15 mother-calf pairs for almost a month, 3 new mothers have been documented in the last two weeks (Figure 1). These 3 mothers bring our current total to 18 mother/calf pairs.



Figure 1. Catalog #1245, "Slalom," with her calf on 13 February 2011 offshore Jacksonville, Florida. (Image: Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission)

At the end of February, preliminary data indicate 139 individual adult and juvenile whales (excluding calves) have been sighted from South Carolina to Florida. This total includes cataloged whales as well as whales with temporary inter-match or season codes that have not yet been matched to the catalog. Contributing sources included the three Early Warning System (EWS) aerial surveys conducted by EcoHealth Alliance (formerly Wildlife Trust)/Georgia Department of Natural Resources (GDNR) and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), South Carolina/Northern Georgia (SCGA) aerial survey conducted by EcoHealth Alliance, the New England Aquarium, UNCW/Duke USWTR survey teams, the biopsy teams (FWC, GDNR and NOAA Northeast Fisheries Science Center), the Marineland Right Whale Project, Marine Resources Council (volunteer public sighting network), and opportunistic sightings by the U.S. Coast Guard, U.S. Navy, harbor pilots, ship captains, recreational boaters, and other research teams.

Based on size and other physical features, an estimated 36 of the 139 individuals are likely one- or two-year old whales (2010 and 2009 season calves). One of these young whales, temporary ID S066, swam into the St. Johns River on 24 January 2011, creating a flurry of activity that included closing the St. Johns River entrance to large-vessel traffic. After spending almost the entire day inside the river, the whale eventually exited the jetties just as the last drop of light disappeared from the sky. Whale S066 has not been sighted again, but is believed to be in good health.

There have been several other notable sightings so far this season. On 25 December 2010, the Northern EWS aerial survey team documented a lone calf off Georgia. During several hours of observation, the calf was never associated with its mother and although a carcass was never found, it is unlikely that this calf could have survived on its own. Additionally, on 20 January 2011, the SCGA aerial survey team sighted right whale Catalog #3853 off Georgia with fresh propeller wounds (Figure 2). The propeller wounds span a large portion of the whale's back and are likely life-threatening, but there have been no subsequent sightings of #3853 to further assess the injuries.

Five new right whale entanglements have been documented in the Southeast US this season. These cases involve four juvenile whales and 2011 season mother Catalog #3010 "Binary". One of the juvenile whales, Catalog #3911, a 2-year-old female, was first sighted by the Southern EWS aerial survey team with a complex entanglement and poor body condition off Florida on 25 December 2010. She was the target of several multi-agency disentanglement operations, but was subsequently found floating dead off Florida on 1 February 2011. The carcass was towed the following day to Butler Beach, south of St. Augustine, Florida, for necropsy (Figure 3). A second right whale carcass was sighted offshore of South Carolina on 19 February 2011. This carcass was badly decomposed, but photographs confirmed that it was not the recently injured whale described above (Catalog #3853).



Figure 2. Right whale Catalog #3853, a three-year-old of unknown gender, sighted off Savannah, Georgia, on 20 January 2011 with recently acquired propeller wounds (Image: EcoHealth Alliance (formerly Wildlife Trust))



Figure 3. Right whale #3911, a two-year-old female reported dead on 1 February 2011 and necropsied on Butler Beach, Florida, on 3 February. (Image: Marineland Right Whale Project)

On a positive note, 2011 season mother Catalog #2029 “Viola” was documented gear-free. In 2007, #2029 had a severe entanglement that involved both flippers. She was the subject of several disentangling operations that year that presumably led to her shedding the gear. Prior to this season, #2029 had not calved since 2006. Additionally, several juvenile whales with resolving or recently healed wounds on the “watch list,” including Catalog #3530 “Ruffian,” Catalog #3930, the 2009 Calf of Catalog #1608, and the 2010 Calf of Catalog #3123 were sighted in the SEUS and appeared in relatively good health. Aerial survey teams are always on the lookout for whales with entanglements, wounds, scars, and signs of either improving or declining body condition. Certain sightings, such as those involving entanglement, often lead to an intervention that may save an individual from death. In many other cases, the photo-documentation of these sightings allow for continued assessment of human impacts on the population.

The EWS surveys will continue through 31 March 2011 and the SCGA surveys will continue through 15 April 2011. With everything we have experienced so far this season, it will be interesting to see what develops over the last month and a half of the season. Stay tuned!

*(Images in this article were authorized under NOAA/NMFS scientific research permits.)*

## **Outcomes of the 17 November 2010 SEIT Meeting**

The recently re-organized North Atlantic Right Whale Recovery Plan Southeast U.S. Implementation Team (SEIT) had its initial meeting on 17 November 2010 at the Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens, Jacksonville, Florida (The Terms of Reference, Objectives, and team membership were described in the December 2010 *Right Whale News*.) The Key Outcomes Memorandum was finalized on 25 January 2011 and provided to *Right Whale News*.

The SEIT meeting was attended by 12 of the 13 Team members including: Nancy Allen, Lance Garrison, Clay George, Mike Getchell, Hardee Kavanaugh (for Bill Kavanaugh), Amy Knowlton, Bill McLellan, Katie Moore, Cathy Sakas, Leslie Ward-Geiger, Tom Wright, and Sharon Young. David Bernhart, Laura Engleby, Paul Kunicki, Greg Schweitzer, and Barb Zoodsma with the Southeast Regional Office (SERO) of the National Marine Fisheries Service convened the meeting. Don Lewis, SERO’s contracted shipping liaison, and Lisa Conger, with the NMFS Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC) also attended the meeting. Members of the public were not invited to attend the meeting. Laura Engleby facilitated the Team’s recovery plan review and discussion.

For the majority of the meeting, the Team focused on reviewing the North Atlantic Right Whale Recovery Plan and other Southeast U.S.-related actions deemed necessary for right whale recovery. The discussion was focused on the major objectives of the step-down outline

referenced in the Recovery Plan. (Team members suggested that NMFS consider updating the recovery plan.)

The Team discussed the Ship Strike Reduction Rule's December 2013 sunset clause and the need to measure rule effectiveness. The Team was interested in learning how NOAA intends to measure success of the rule and NOAA's process for addressing the sunset clause. Barb Zoodsma mentioned that the agency had conducted a workshop to determine ways to assess the effectiveness of the rule and would provide copies of the final report to the team. (*The Report of a Workshop on Assessing the Effectiveness of the Right Whale Ship Strike Reduction Rule, 19-20 November 2008, Silver Spring, Maryland*, G. Silber and S. Bettridge (eds.), 26 pp. is available by phoning (301) 713-2322 or by contacting Shannon Bettridge at [Shannon.Bettridge@noaa.gov](mailto:Shannon.Bettridge@noaa.gov).)

The Team discussed the increasing threat to right whales from smaller vessels that are not subject to the ship-strike reduction rule (includes vessels 65 ft or less in length). The best way to manage these smaller vessels was unclear. The Team discussed the need to enhance outreach to recreational vessels such as working with bait shops, marinas, USCG auxiliary boating classes, and the USCG.

The Team was interested in learning if NOAA has developed demographically-based recovery criteria. The Team stated that a briefing from NOAA on any defined recovery metrics as well as insights into potential data gaps would be helpful.

The aerial surveys that are central to the Early Warning System were discussed at length. The Team noted that aerial surveys contribute to many of the objectives in the Recovery Plan and discussed the need to configure surveys to best meet recovery needs. The link between the surveys, possible modifications to the surveys, and commercial mariners were discussed.

In the end, several actions were discussed, gained traction, and received consensus support. Among them was the consensus to convene a planning committee/workgroup to plan an aerial survey workshop to evaluate aerial surveys relative to recovery needs. The planning committee was charged with consolidating survey objectives, framing review questions, establishing draft Terms of Reference for the workshop, establishing workshop goals/objectives, and identifying participants. Barb Zoodsma will lead the planning committee. The workshop may consider if the current survey design is preferred or whether it could be improved given competing objectives? Initial efforts will focus on consolidating Team member views on recovery goals addressed by the surveys and ideas/approaches for reviewing efficacy of aerial surveys to meet those recovery objectives. Key questions include: 1) Given current knowledge, what recovery objectives are being addressed by the surveys? 2) Given current knowledge, what recovery objectives are being addressed by the surveys' distribution? How do we know aerial surveys are effective in addressing those recovery objectives? 3) How do we know what the actual benefits and

limitations are for real-time ship-strike management? 4) How is aerial survey effectiveness measured? For example, if one female is saved from vessel collision, does that justify survey effort? 5) What recovery objectives are best addressed through aerial surveys? 6) Is the current approach still reasonable, or can enhancements be made? 7) What is role of passive acoustic monitoring (PAM) in achieving similar goals? How much can PAM augment air survey efforts? The stated end result of the survey review is for the SEIT to provide recommendations to SERO for how to move forward with aerial surveys. (*Recall that an aerial survey workshop was held 20-21 June 2005 in St. Petersburg, Florida—similarly initiated by the SEIT and SERO. A summary is provided in the August 2005 Right Whale News. (Ed.)*)

The next meeting of the SEUS Right Whale Forum and Implementation Team is scheduled for 24-25 May 2011, Samburu Room, Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens, Jacksonville, Florida. Contact Leslie Ward-Geiger (leslie.ward@myfwc.com) for information and agenda.

## **Public Input Requested: Ocean Policy Task Force**

On 19 July 2009, President Obama signed Executive Order 13547 establishing a National Policy for the Stewardship of the Ocean, our Coasts, and the Great Lakes. *Right Whale News* covered this initiative in the November 2009 and December 2010 issues. As the initiative develops, further public input has been requested. On 24 January 2011, the National Ocean Council sought input on the development of strategic action plans for the nine priority objectives described in the Final Recommendations of the Interagency Ocean Policy Task Force (for information about the NOC, Executive Order 13547, and the Final Recommendations, see [www.WhiteHouse.gov/oceans](http://www.WhiteHouse.gov/oceans)). Comments should be submitted by 29 April 2011. Draft action plans will be released for public review in the summer of 2011. The strategic action plans are expected to be completed by the end of 2011.

For each of the nine policy objectives, the NOC is requesting responses to:

- What near-term, mid-term, and long-term actions would most effectively help the Nation achieve this policy objective?
- What are some of the major obstacles to achieving this objective; are there opportunities this objective can further, including transformative changes in how we address the stewardship of the oceans, coasts, and Great Lakes?
- What milestones and performance measures would be most useful for measuring progress toward achieving this priority objective?

Comments should be submitted electronically at:

[www.WhiteHouse.gov/administration.eop/oceans/comment](http://www.WhiteHouse.gov/administration.eop/oceans/comment) or by mail to: National Ocean Council, 722 Jackson Place, NW, Washington D.C. 20503.

## Calendar

24-25 May 2011. Right Whale Forum and SEUS Right Whale Implementation Team meetings. Samburu Room, Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens, Jacksonville, Florida. The SEIT meeting will be closed to everyone but SEIT and SERO personnel. Contact Leslie Ward-Geiger (leslie.ward@myfwc.com) or Barb Zoodsma (barb.zoodsma@noaa.gov) for information and agenda.

27 November-2 December 2011. Society for Marine Mammal Biennial Conference, Tampa Convention Center, Tampa, Florida. See [www.marinemammalscience.org](http://www.marinemammalscience.org) for further information.

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## ***Right Whale News***

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