

RIGHT WHALE NEWS

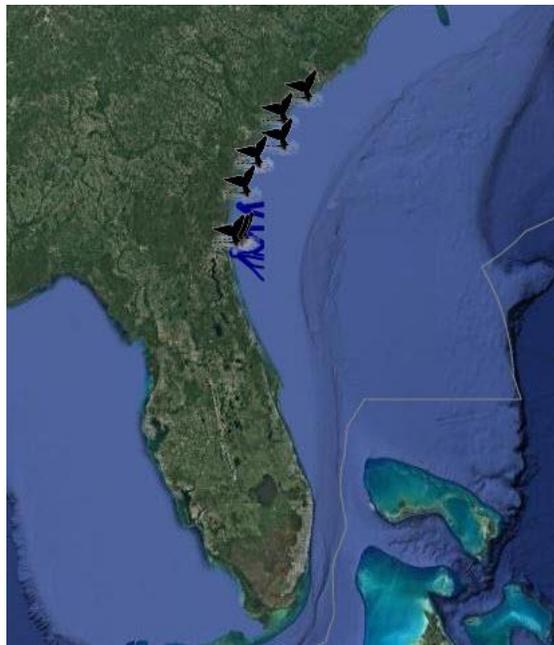
*An independent forum for right whale conservation and recovery,
publishing several times each year.*

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The SEUS Season Begins: Flippers Crossed !

There is hope on the horizon. As of 6 December 2019, the migration of right whales from feeding grounds in the north to the calving and wintering grounds in the southeast U.S. has begun. There is an early hint of promise for this calving season. On 23 November, Catalog #3101, *Harmonia*, was sighted about six nautical miles off Jacksonville, Florida. She is 19 years old and last calved in 2016. Between then and the end of November, four more right whales were sighted—off South Carolina and Georgia. The four additional right whales are also calving females, ranging in age from 19 to 38. As of this writing, no first-time mothers have been sighted.

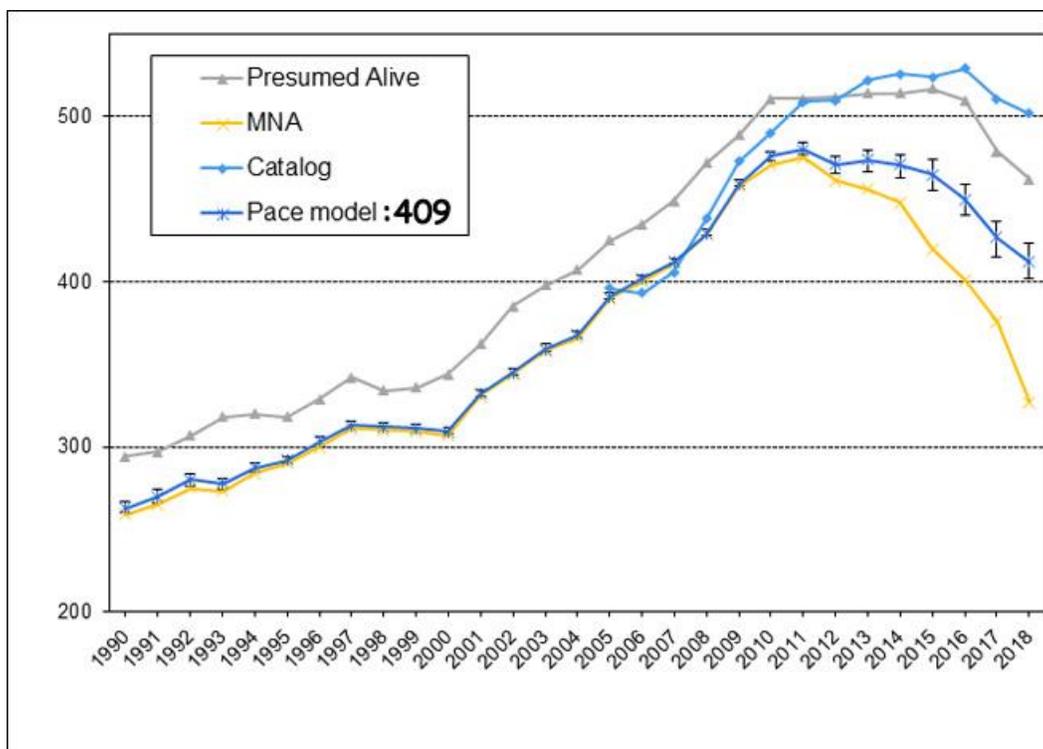


*Potentially calving females were sighted in late November 2019 from South Carolina to northern Florida.
What does the season hold? (Plot source: <https://www.nefsc.noaa.gov/psb/surveys/>)*

After several years of poor calf production and a declining population, will the 2020 season be a turn-around? As Yogi Berra stated, “it’s hard to make predictions, especially when it’s about the future.” OK then, flippers crossed.

Right Whale Population Decline Continues: Report card for 2018

The annual meeting of the North Atlantic Right Whale Consortium was held on 14–15 November 2019 at the Hannaford Center, University of Southern Maine, Portland, Maine. About 310 attended. As is the custom, the meeting led off with the presentation of the Right Whale Report Card—the status of the right whale population as of the end of 2018. Presenter Heather Pettis described that the agreed-upon best estimate for the population size at the end of 2018 was 409 individuals. As has been typical for recent estimates, the uncertainty (error bars in the estimate) is greater due to a lag time in processing data.



The best estimate for the North Atlantic right whale population size is 409 individuals as of the end of 2018. The final Right Whale Report Card, with details and the multiple components will be posted at www.narwc.org in January.

Ropeless Fishing: “It’s Coming!”

On Wednesday, 13 November 2019, the Ropeless Consortium held its second meeting—in the Hannaford Center at the University of Southern Maine, Portland, Maine. During the course of the meeting, discussion, statements, and opinions captured the flavor:

- * learn what we can do now, we have not arrived at a final solution.
- * experimental trials indicate that it’s not as bad as you might think, but we’re still in the development stage.
- * when you shut down an area to fishermen, they’re going to come up with ways to get back in.
- * the technology is not a finished product, but has potential.
- * the fishing closures are to buoy lines, not the lobster harvesters.
- * the development will move at the pace at which we are funded.

Throughout the day, the meeting could be described as healthy and collaborative with open dialogue and listening.

Many of the presentations have been posted at www.ropeless.org.

Right Whale Decision-Support Tool: Independent Review

A decision-support tool has been developed to help understand the relative risk of entanglement in different geographic locations and the relative reduction in risk using various mitigation measures. Recall that the Risk-Reduction Support Tool was developed by a team of scientists from the Northeast Fisheries Science Center, National Marine Fisheries Service, and presented to the Atlantic Large Whale Take Reduction Team at its April 2019 meeting. At that time, several weaknesses in the Tool were identified and some team members had criticisms (see RWN September 2019). The agency agreed to explore possible improvements. Following through, reviewers evaluated the method, and also considered whether this work provides a scientifically credible basis for developing management advice.

The review took place on 19 to 21 November 2019 at the Swope Center, Marine Biological Laboratory, Woods Hole, Massachusetts. The peer reviewers were selected by the Center for Independent Experts (ciereviews.org). They were: Dr. Julie van der Hoop, Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, Woods Hole, Massachusetts; Dr. Jason Dow, Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, Padbury, Western Australia; and Dr. Don Bowen, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia.

The meetings were open to the public and available via webinar. The objectives of the meeting are posted at: <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/event/peer-review-right-whale-decision-support-tool>. Likewise, the meeting report will be available in several weeks and also posted at this site.

Editorial

Jim Hain

With this issue of *Right Whale News*, the increasing level of activity, dialogue, experimentation, and attention directed to issues with recovery and conservation of right whales is evident. Now, the central question is, “Will this activity translate into results, forward movement, and a healthier right whale population?” This is not an academic exercise. This is time-critical. This depends on the resolve and positive dimensions of human nature. We are stewards. We will be judged. The proof is in the pudding.

People and Changes

Changes are underway at the New England Aquarium. Longtime leader, Dr. Scott Kraus, is retiring after 40 years of directing the Right Whale Research Program. He will retire at the end of 2019, but assures everyone that he will remain committed to right whale science and conservation. At the recent Consortium meetings, he described that he “will do what he has always done, but just not get paid.” Moving forward, the leadership of the right whale program will be by Dr. Peter Corkeron, who has transitioned from the Northeast Fisheries Science Center, and by Dr. Jessica Redfern, who has transitioned from the Southwest Fisheries Science Center.

Right Whale News

Right Whale News is a publication of Associated Scientists at Woods Hole. It is disseminated online through the courtesy of the North Atlantic Right Whale Consortium. The Editor is Jim Hain. The Editorial board consists of Julie Albert, Robert Kenney, Hans Neuhauser, and Amy Whitt. The current and back issues of *Right Whale News* published between 1994 and 2018 are available at the North Atlantic Right Whale Consortium website, www.narwc.org, under the *Right Whale News* tab.

To submit ideas, article topics, and comments, contact Editor Jim Hain at jhain@earthlink.net and place “RWN Editorial” in the subject line. To subscribe, please use the “Mail Chimp”

system at: <http://eepurl.com/JvmKf>. The link is also available via the *Right Whale News* tab on www.narwc.org.

Citing *Right Whale News*: The requested format for citations from *Right Whale News* is: Right Whale News Volume(number): page(s). Alternatively, a less formal citation may simply use month and year of issue.

An index to *Right Whale News*, subject and author, for the period 2014-2004 is posted at the North Atlantic Right Whale Consortium website, www.narwc.org—under the *Right Whale News* tab. Indexing for the period 2004-1994 is underway.

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Jim Hain, Editor of *Right Whale News*, is a member of the Society for Environmental Journalists.