

RIGHT WHALE NEWS

*An independent forum for right whale conservation and recovery,
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Report from the SEUS calving grounds: Has the bottom dropped out? No calves in 2018!

As the southeastern U.S. (SEUS) right whale calving and nursing season draws to a close, not a single mother-calf pair has been reported. None. Zero. If this holds true, it will be the worst calving season in the more than three decades of SEUS right whale monitoring and research. Further, with the exception of a juvenile male along the west coast of Florida, no right whales have been reported in Florida this season. None. Zero.

The lack of sightings is not for lack of trying. The Georgia DNR/Sea to Shore Alliance, Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission, Marineland Right Whale Project, and Marine Resources Council teams have been diligent in their monitoring. And, while Florida has been devoid of sightings, a handful have been reported from Georgia—including a group of eight—totaling perhaps 15 individuals in all. However, they tended to be offshore and did not venture south of Brunswick. While at least two known reproductive females were sighted, no calves were reported.

In light of the current numbers, Philip Hamilton, New England Aquarium, in a CBC radio interview, described that the average calf production over the last 20 years has been 17.

This is not the first. There have been dips in reproduction in earlier years. There was a three-year period, 1998 to 2000, with a low and declining calf production. This culminated in 2000, with a single mother-calf pair. As with the present situation, these sightings were exclusively in Georgia waters (the pair was not sighted in Florida). Following this event, in 2001, there was a sizeable rebound to 31, which stood as the record high until the birth of 39 calves in 2009.

However, when the lack of calves in the 2018 SEUS season is combined with the high mortality numbers for 2017-18 (total known mortalities for the period stands at 18, see *Right Whale News*, November 2017), optimism is hard to come by.

Editorial

Whales and Dinosaurs

Jim Hain

When the complete lack of calves in the SEUS is joined with the high mortality numbers of 2017-18, some have begun to seriously talk of extinction, catastrophes, and dire outcomes. Is it too soon for this conversation? Perhaps not.

On the other hand, will calves somehow appear up north and later in the year? Yes? No? Will measures be put in place to reduce mortalities? Yes? No? Will funding and resources increase to meet the increasing informational and management needs and concerns? Yes? No? Will implementation, take-reduction, and international working group teams effect any useful changes? Yes? No?

Will Lazarus arise from the dead? Will we be able to speak of resilience and natural cycles? Or, will right whales go the way of the dinosaurs, remembered as small plastic models in the tchotchke bins at toy stores and “life-like” models in museum displays?

Time to put the rubber on the road, people! Dispense with the arm-waving and political wrangling. Find the middle ground. Show ‘em what we got! Emulate Pete Seeger, Sandra Steingraber, and Jane Goodall. Stewardship . . . whales, ocean, planet . . . we are accountable. And, yes, I know I’m showing my age here, but let’s go back to Canned Heat’s 1970 song, *Let’s Work Together* . . . and crank it up!

Another Baleen Whale at Risk of Extinction

A whale that you may not have heard of has the potential to go extinct. In a recent Correspondence piece to *Nature* (full citation in literature section), Peter Corkeron and Scott Kraus refer to the recent IUCN Red Listing. The Gulf of Mexico whale, a subspecies of *Balaenoptera edeni*, is at risk of being the first baleen whale to go extinct since the Atlantic gray whale, *Eschrichtius robustus*, three centuries ago. The authors point out that the status of the species has generated little public response.

The Gulf of Mexico whale is similar to Bryde’s and Eden’s whales (both also named *B. edeni*), but is genetically distinct from both. It is entirely confined to US waters in the Gulf of Mexico. Survey data put its abundance at 33 individuals in 2009. Modeling suggests that almost half its habitat was affected by the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in 2010.

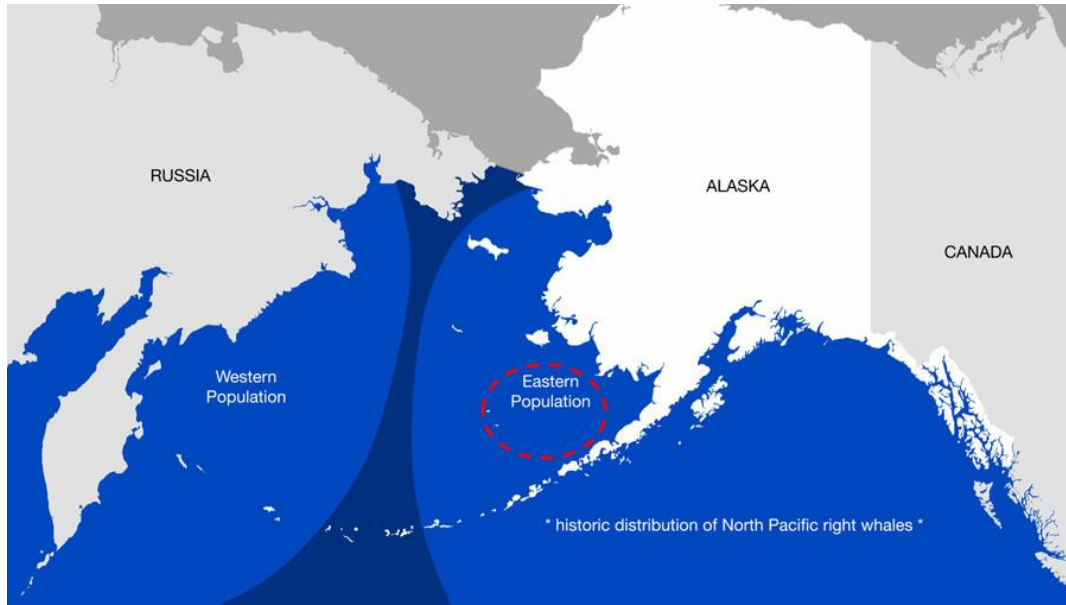
North Pacific Right Whales: Sighting of Juvenile Hints at Reproduction

A recent report by Jessica Crance, National Marine Mammal Laboratory, Alaska Fisheries Science Center, in Seattle, offers some small hope for the population of the eastern population of North Pacific right whales. During a 15 July to 13 September 2017 survey of the eastern Bering Sea by an International Whaling Commission (IWC) cruise, aboard the *Yushin Maru #2*, 12 right whales, including one juvenile, were photographed. The report of a juvenile is encouraging—it means that there is at least one reproductive female, and the evidence of successful breeding provides some hope.



Juvenile North Pacific right whale photographed 9 August 2017. This sighting gives some hope to successful breeding in the population. (Photo: Koji Matsuoka, IWC)

The North Pacific right whale is split into two populations: the western and eastern. The Eastern North Pacific right whale is one of the most critically endangered large whales in the world. The current estimate for the eastern population is around 30. With only 30 individuals left, if this population goes extinct, it is likely that [we would never see] any more right whales in the Eastern Bering Sea or along the west coast of the United States. Before whaling, this population covered the entire Bering Sea and larger sections of the Gulf of Alaska. But now their distribution range is constricted.



North Pacific right whale population ranges. The red dashed area represents the presently constricted eastern range. (Graphic: J. Crance, NMFS)

While there isn't a good current estimate for the western population, the numbers are believed to be in the low hundreds. An IWC cruise in the summer of either 2018 or 2019 will survey the western Bering Sea.

To download a copy of the current North Pacific right whale 5-year status review, go to: <https://alaskafisheries.noaa.gov/sites/default/files/2018nprw5yr-review.pdf>.

Canada-U.S. Independent Advisory Committee For Right Whale Recovery Formed

Following on a proposal at the October 2017 meeting of the North Atlantic Right Whale Consortium (see *Right Whale News*, November 2017), a Canada-U.S. Independent Advisory Committee (IAC) for Right Whale Recovery has been formed.

The goal of the IAC is to reduce human impacts on right whales to levels that permit the survival and robust recovery of the species using pragmatic approaches. (Robust recovery is defined here as an annual population growth rate of 2% or more over 20 years (identical to the U.S. Right Whale Recovery Plan)).

In pursuit of its goal, the IAC will identify, recommend, and advocate for actions that will reduce human impacts on right whales to levels that permit the species to achieve a robust recovery.

Initially, based on advice of the working groups addressing fishing-gear entanglements and ship strikes (see Structure below), the IAC will recommend to the Canadian and U.S. governments, no later than 1 August 2018, specific actions to (1) reduce mortality caused by entanglements and ship strikes and (2) mitigate the sub-lethal effects of entanglements on right whale reproduction

As envisioned, the IAC is an organization independent of government whose sole function is to identify, recommend, and advocate for specific actions to reduce human-caused right whale mortality and threats that depress calving rates (*e.g.*, sub-lethal effects of entanglements). It is critical that identified actions be supported by scientific evidence. Recommendations will be made primarily to the Canadian and U.S. governments based on the majority opinion within each working group. The authority of the IAC derives from the reputation of and the level of cooperation among the working group members. The fundamental premise of the IAC is that actions recommended *jointly* by scientists, industry, and conservationists will have the greatest chance of being accepted and implemented, and therefore will be most successful in reducing human impacts on right whales.

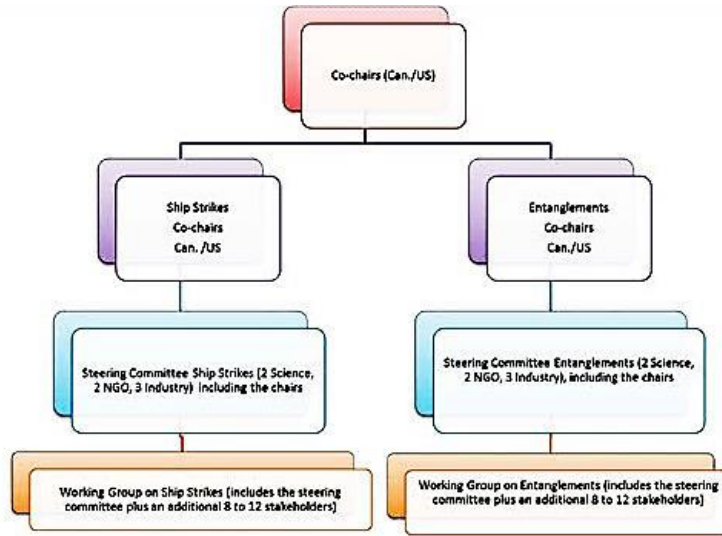
Two co-chairs will oversee the administration of the IAC, and these co-chairs can establish working groups within the IAC structure. Because of the acute and well-documented impacts of entanglements and ship strikes on right whale recovery, two working groups will be formed: one for entanglements and another for ship strikes. Future working groups may be formed to address other threats that are deemed detrimental to the recovery of right whales (*e.g.*, ocean noise).

Each working group will consist of 15-20 individuals from the U.S. and Canada, including a steering committee of 5 people and 2 co-chairs (one from Canada and one from the U.S.) who will direct the activities of the working group (see figure below). Each steering committee will consist of 2 scientists, 2 conservationists, and 3 individuals representing industry interests for a total of 7 members including the co-chairs. Each working group will consist of approximately 4-5 scientists, 4-5 conservationists, and 8-10 industry representatives from both Canada and the U.S. Government representatives from both countries will be invited to join the working groups as observers and to provide information as needed.

According to Mark Baumgartner, Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, the steering committee for each working group has been formed, and they are close to finalizing the rest of the membership for each of the working groups. Each steering group met in February, and full working group meetings will be scheduled soon.

The IAC co-chairs are Randy Reeves (Okapi Wildlife Associates, Canada) and Scott Kraus (New England Aquarium, U.S.). The co-chairs of the ship-strike working group are Moira Brown (Canadian Whale Institute, Canada) and Amy Knowlton (New England Aquarium, U.S.). The co-chairs of the entanglement working group are Sean Brilliant (Canadian Wildlife Federation, Canada) and Mark Baumgartner (Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, U.S.). The IAC

executive committee will consist of the two IAC co-chairs and the co-chairs of each working group.



The structure of the newly formed Canada-U.S. Independent Advisory Committee (IAC) for Right Whale Recovery.



Right Whale World Year: 2020

The executive committee of the Right Whale World Year: 2020 has announced the addition of whale watch naturalist and educator, Cynde McInnis (thewhalemobile.com), and Jen Kennedy, co-founder with Dianna Schulte of Blue Ocean Society for Marine Conservation. Cynde and Jen will be taking on organizational leadership roles working with committee members Amy

Knowlton, Heather Pettis, Marianna Hagbloom, Scott Kraus, Bill McWeeny, and Zack Klyver. “We are essentially 20 months away from launching the world year at the end of 2019”, stated Cynde McInnis, “so we will be making a big push to get the right whale community on the various committees we are setting up and organize everything to prepare for the launch in 2020.” The Right Whale World Year (RWWY) was moved to 2020 to reflect the idea that “2020 will be hindsight and we need to act now”.

The mission of the RWWY is to focus attention on all three right whales—the North Atlantic right whale, the North Pacific right whale, and the southern right whale—and the many challenges facing them. The year’s events, celebrations and special initiatives are intended to support and augment global efforts aimed at securing the future of right whales and protecting the ocean habitats they depend on for their survival. “We are looking forward to raising awareness of right whales and creating a global year of celebrations around all three species,” stated Jen Kennedy.

If you would like to help by serving on a committee please contact Cynde McInnis at rw@thewhalemobile.com or 1-617-838-2646.

Saving Giants: Survival of the North Atlantic Right Whale



Following on conversations at the October 2017 marine mammal meetings in Halifax, Endangered Oceans Films has announced that the feature-length film project focusing on the conservation of the North Atlantic right whale is now officially under way. “Saving Giants: Survival of the North Atlantic Right Whale” is scheduled for release at the end of 2018.

The production team at Endangered Oceans Films is grateful to have the involvement of many in the NARWC community, including Moe Brown, Heather Pettis, Clay George, Tom Pitchford, Chris Slay, and others from NEAQ, CCS, and NOAA, as well as research and media

professionals from the U.S. and Canada. The goal for the film is broad distribution into 2019, creating the opportunity for public conversations, and giving stakeholders an opportunity to share their perspectives and find common ground.

For more information on the project, to become involved, or to extend your financial support, visit the production website at: [www.endangereadoceansfilms.com](http://www.endangeredoceansfilms.com)

NOAA 2015–2016 ESA Report Published

The NOAA/NMFS Recovering Threatened and Endangered Species, FY 2015-2016 Report to Congress has been posted. At the core of the report is the Species in the Spotlight Initiative, launched in 2015. While right whales were not included in this initiative, the prefatory letter by NMFS Director Chris Oliver acknowledges the new information received after the report went to press. Oliver describes that the agency will determine whether to add North Atlantic right whales to the Species in the Spotlight list for the next Biennial Report.

The report is available online via the NMFS Office of Protected Resources website at <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/resource/document/recovering-threatened-and-endangered-species-report-congress-fy-2015-2016>.

Humpback Whales in the Southeast U.S.

During the course of right whale monitoring in SEUS waters, humpback whales are occasionally encountered. Data collection is ongoing. In addition to adding information about this species, perhaps some of the learning can be applied to right whales.

So far this season, 13 unique individual humpbacks in the SEUS have been identified— ranging from Ossabaw Island, Georgia, to Matanzas Inlet, Florida. This number of humpbacks is on par with unique individuals from last season. Some of the individuals have had multiple re-sights and others have only been seen once. Historically humpback sightings have been pretty variable, with some seasons having “lots” of humpbacks and others with very few.

Of note is the fact that two humpbacks have died in the SEUS this year. SEUS1805 was first seen on 5 January off Jacksonville Beach. He was subsequently seen on 19 and 20 January off Amelia Island (in good body condition) before being found dead on Fernandina Beach on 28 January. The necropsy report indicates the probable cause of death as blunt force trauma from vessel strike.

SEUS1804 was first seen on 17 December off Ponte Vedra Beach. The whale was later identified as a known yearling (the 2017 calf of *Cajun*), who was seen entangled off Massachusetts during the summer of 2017. The entanglement consisted of a short section of gillnet gear in the mouth and across the rostrum. Due to the cryptic nature of gillnet entanglements, it was difficult to tell (based on aerial photographs) whether the entanglement was still present in December. The whale was subsequently seen on 12, 17, and 20 February before being found freshly dead off Cumberland Island, Georgia on 24 February. A satellite buoy was attached to the carcass that day, and based on photo documentation between 24 and 28 February, it was quickly scavenged by sharks and presumably sank on 1 March when the satellite buoy stopped transmitting. Unfortunately, due to the distance from shore and the rapid scavenger damage, the carcass was not towed in for necropsy.

Lastly, the upper jaw of a juvenile humpback came ashore in Flagler Beach, Florida, on 14 February. The report was relayed by the Marineland Right Whale Project to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission Team. Samples were taken. The jaw was recovered the following day by staff and volunteers from the Georgia Aquarium's Dolphin Conservation Field Station in Marineland. Arrangements will be made for public display.

Jen Jakush, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, contributed to this article.

People and Changes

NOAA has named Michael Pentony as the new Regional Administrator for the Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office (GARFO) in Gloucester, Massachusetts. He assumed this position on 22 January 2018. Pentony has been with the agency since 2002. He succeeds retiring Regional Administrator John Bullard, who had been in the position since 2012.

Calendar

16-17 May 2018. Spring meeting of the Southeast U.S. Implementation Team (SEIT). Guana Tolomato Matanzas National Estuarine Research Reserve, Education Center, 505 Guana River Road, Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida. For further information, contact Thomas.Pitchford@MyFWC.com.

Scientific Literature and Reports

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Right Whale News

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

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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.