

# RIGHT WHALE NEWS

The Newsletter of the Southeastern United States Implementation Team for the Recovery  
of the Northern Right Whale and the Northeast Whale Implementation Team

**VOLUME 5 NUMBER 4 NOVEMBER 1998**

## **Professor David Gaskin, Whale Ecologist**

Dr. David E. Gaskin, Professor of Zoology at the University of Guelph in Ontario, Canada, passed away September 13, due to liver cancer.

David's research interests were varied, ranging from the feeding ecology of whales to the systematics of cambid moths. In 1969, he began a long-term field program studying the ecology of marine mammals and seabirds in the Bay of Fundy. This program, which continues today, has led to significant advances in our understanding of the ecology of predators in coastal ecosystems, particularly the harbor porpoise. Among his numerous publications was the book, *The Ecology of Whales and Dolphins*, published in 1982.

Because of his knowledge of whale ecology in general and right whales in particular, and his understanding of the Bay of Fundy ecosystem, David was asked to serve on the National Marine Fisheries Service's Right Whale Recovery Team, which developed the *Final Recovery Plan for the Northern Right Whale, Eubalaena glacialis* (1991). His contributions to the plan were numerous, and he was particularly adept in helping other team members understand and appreciate Canadian sensitivities to right whale management and recovery.

David also served on a number of other working groups including the Canadian Committee on Whales and Whaling and the International Whaling Commission's Scientific Committee.

In honor of his contributions to the teaching program at the University of Guelph, the Department of Zoology will offer the Gaskin Medal in Marine and Freshwater Biology annually to an outstanding undergraduate student. Contributions to the fund are welcome and should be made payable to the University of Guelph and sent to Dr. Paul Hebert, Department of Zoology, University of Guelph, Guelph, Ontario, N1G 2W1, Canada.

*Information from the Marine Mammal*

- *Society Newsletter 6 (3):7 and other sources.*

### **Please Help Evaluate *Right Whale News***

**Right Whale News** was started five years ago to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of recovery efforts for the world's most endangered large whale, the Northern Right Whale. Is the newsletter accomplishing its goal?

Several grants that help underwrite the preparation of *Right Whale News* and support its free distribution will end in 1999. Decisions will need to be made soon as to whether to continue to publish the newsletter. Comments from our readers will be important in influencing those decisions.

Please send your responses to the following questions no later than February 1 to Hans Neuhauser, Editor, *Right Whale News*, c/o Georgia Environmental Policy Institute, 380 Meigs Street, Athens, GA 30601, USA; tel. 706-546-7507; fax 706-613-7775, e-mail: [gepi@ix.netcom.com](mailto:gepi@ix.netcom.com)

- Is *Right Whale News* accomplishing its goal of improving right whale recovery efforts?
- Should *Right Whale News* continue to be published?
- If yes, how can it be improved? If no, please explain.
- Do you have additional comments?

Thanks!

### **Congress Appropriates \$350,000 for Right Whales**

The U.S. Congress has appropriated \$350,000 to support right whale work in fiscal year 1999, an increase of \$100,000 from what the House of Representatives approved in August. The National Marine Fisheries Service plans to add to this amount, so the total available should be between \$1.0 and 1.5 million.

### **Congress Establishes National Whale Conservation Fund**

Thanks to the leadership of Senators Judd Gregg (R-NH) and Ted Stevens (R-AK), the National Whale Conservation Fund is now a reality. The measure was included in the Omnibus Appropriations bill recently passed by Congress. As reported in the August 1998

issue of *Right Whale News* (page 3), the measure will establish a fund to support research, management activities and educational programs that contribute to the protection, conservation or recovery of whale populations in U.S. waters. Priority will be given to projects that conserve the most endangered whales, including the right whale. Monies for the fund will come from voluntary sources.

The Marine Mammal Commission is currently working with the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation to develop the details of the fund's operation.

### **Progress Reported in Development of Large Whale Recovery Plans**

Under the direction of Dr. Greg Silber, the National Marine Fisheries Service is preparing or revising a number of large whale recovery plans. Last July, the NMFS published the final *Recovery Plan for the Blue Whale* (see Scientific Literature and Reports section on page 13 for complete citation). The NMFS also has prepared a draft recovery plan for sei and fin whales and another draft plan for sperm whales. Phil Clapham and Greg Silber are preparing a revision of the (1991) *Final Recovery Plan for the Northern Right Whale*. A draft of the revised right whale plan is expected to be available for review in early 1999.

### **Community Consultations will begin in Early 1999**

#### **on Canadian Right Whale Draft Recovery Plan**

The team developing the recovery plan for the northern right whale in Canadian waters is expected to hold its final meeting in November. Soon thereafter, a draft will be completed and available for review. A series of community consultations are being planned for early 1999; these will be held in both Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. It is hoped that a final plan can be completed by March 1999.

For more information on the draft plan and the consultations, contact Jerry Conway at the Canadian Department of Fisheries and Oceans, 902-426-9609.

In the meantime, Canada's Environmental Minister, Christine Stewart, has announced her intention to propose legislation creating an endangered species act early in 1999. Such a measure would provide the legal underpinning for implementation of the right whale recovery plan.

### **Marine Mammal Commission Annual Meeting Focuses on Right Whales**

The Marine Mammal Commission held its 37<sup>th</sup> annual meeting in Portland, Maine, November 10 - 12. The first day's agenda focused on right whales, with presentations and discussions on (1) an overview of organizational involvements, (2) the status of the North Atlantic population, (3) right whale-vessel interactions in the North Atlantic, (4) right whale-fishery interactions, (5) other possible causes of poor recovery, (6) the North Pacific and Sea of Okhotsk right whale populations and (7) the status of right whale recovery plans in the U.S. and Canada. The second day's agenda included topics related to right whales including (1) sources and effects of anthropogenic noise, (2) stranded marine mammals and (3) whale watching. During the meeting, the Commission also discussed issues related to harbor porpoises, New England seals, humpback whales in the North Atlantic, bottlenose dolphins, sea otters, Florida manatees and Hawaiian monk seals.

It is expected that the meeting will result in a series of letters to federal and state agencies recommending specific improvements in their activities that will enhance the survival and recovery of the northern right whale and other species. A more comprehensive report of the meeting and the Commission's recommendations will be provided in the February 1999 issue of *Right Whale News*.

### **NMFS Considers Formation of Mid-Atlantic Whale Recovery Team**

The National Marine Fisheries Service is currently considering the establishment of a Mid-Atlantic whale recovery team to address areas of geographic and topical concern that fall between the areas covered by the Northeast Whale Recovery Team and the Southeastern U.S. Implementation Team. The thinking is that the issues of the mid-Atlantic are sufficiently different from those of the existing teams to justify a separate team. The geographic scope of the mid-Atlantic team has yet to be determined but it likely will focus on North Carolina and Virginia. Representatives of South Carolina have been invited to participate in the Southeastern U.S. Implementation Team meetings.

### **Recent Mortalities and Entanglements**

On October 7, a 14.6-meter long adult male right whale washed ashore on North Carolina's coast about 200 meters south of the state's border with Virginia. The animal was in an advanced state of decomposition; no skin was left nor were any vestiges of callosity patterns. A necropsy was performed under the leadership of Dr. Bill McClelland of the University of North Carolina. The results are not complete, but nine transverse processes of the cervical vertebrae were either cracked or broken in one direction. The injury may have resulted from a collision with a ship. It is not known whether the injury occurred before or after the whale's death.

The October 19 report of a stranded right whale at Rattling Brook on the north coast of Newfoundland brought Amy Knowlton of the New England Aquarium to investigate. The animal turned out not to be a right whale but a bowhead whale, a 9-meter long female. The stranding represents the first Newfoundland record of a bowhead for several centuries. A small population of bowheads reportedly still exists between Baffin Island and Greenland.

At least three right whale entanglements occurred this summer. Two whales were temporarily entrapped in a fishing weir at Grand Manan Island in the Bay of Fundy; it is not known whether either whale sustained injury as a result. Another whale (#2212) became entangled for a second time. This whale was first observed entangled in the Bay of Fundy in August 1997 (see *Right Whale News* 5 (3): 6). On July 24, 1998, the Center for Coastal Studies removed all of the gear from around the animal's tail, but some line remained in the mouth. Later in the summer, the whale became entangled again off Barnstable, Massachusetts. On September 14, the Center again disentangled the animal, removing both the new gear and some of the old gear in the whale's mouth.

## **Northeast Whale Implementation Team Recommends**

### **Actions to Reduce Risk of Ship Strikes**

At the November 5<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Northeast Whale Implementation Team, members adopted a number of recommendations to the National Marine Fisheries Service to reduce the risk of ship strikes to large whales. Included in the recommendations were: (1) the NMFS should work with the Implementation Team to develop and create a broadly-constituted whale watching advisory group to address whale watching issues; (2) the NMFS should contact all ships coming into port that either have or might have been involved in a strike of a whale, with the intent of learning as much as possible about the incident; also a system should be developed to keep track of the information; (3) the NMFS should seek to include right whale information in a variety of maritime publications and (4) the NMFS should further investigate and verify the distribution of right whales in the Block Island Sound area. The adopted recommendations were based on drafts prepared by the Team's Ship Strike Subcommittee, chaired by Amy Knowlton of the New England Aquarium and Bruce Russell of the International Fund for Animal Welfare.

### **Caution Urges for Maine's Marine Highway System**

Proposals being advanced by Maine's Governor, the Department of Transportation and others to use the Gulf of Maine as a marine highway system for high-speed vessels have fishermen and the Northeast Whale Implementation Team worried. At their November 5<sup>th</sup> meeting, the Team voted unanimously to send a letter to the National Marine Fisheries Service, with a copy to the Governor of Maine, alerting them to the risk of such a system for

both right and humpback whales and urging them to pay attention to the issue. The operation of high-speed vessels in the Gulf of Maine already has proved to be a hazard to both humans and whales. This summer, one high-speed vessel hit a fishing boat, resulting in a fatality. Another vessel, a high-speed catamaran, ran over and seriously injured a humpback whale, leaving deep scars in its back.

### **U.S. Supreme Court Refuses to Hear Massachusetts Appeal**

In 1996, as a result of a lawsuit brought by GreenWorld activist Max Strahan, U.S. District Judge Douglas Woodlock ordered the Commonwealth of Massachusetts to do more to protect the northern right whale. Among his orders, Judge Woodlock required Massachusetts to devise a plan to "restrict, modify or eliminate the use of lobster gear, gillnets and other fixed fishing gear while the whales are in the area." The Commonwealth appealed the decision, arguing that the Judge violated the 10<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution by ordering Massachusetts to ban fishing operations that the federal government itself had not banned. In October, 1997, the 1<sup>st</sup> U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals upheld the order, ruling that Judge Woodlock had not exceeded his authority in finding Massachusetts guilty of violating the Endangered Species Act. Massachusetts appealed again. The Clinton administration had recommended that the Supreme Court either reject the appeal or send it back to the Appeals court for further consideration. Finally, on November 2, 1998, the U.S. Supreme Court rejected the appeal without comment, letting Judge Woodlock's order stand.

### **NMFS Proposes 1999 List of Fisheries**

The Marine Mammal Protection Act requires that the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) publish an annual list that places all U. S. commercial fisheries into categories based on their frequency of incidental death or serious injury of marine mammals. Last February, the NMFS published the 1998 List of Fisheries. In it, three fisheries were identified as Category I, those with the highest frequency of right whale death or serious injury. These were the large pelagic drift gillnet fishery (Atlantic, Gulf of Mexico, Caribbean), the northeast multi-species sink gillnet fishery, and the lobster pot and trap fishery (Gulf of Maine and U.S. mid-Atlantic). Listing these fisheries as Category I requires fishers to register, carry an observer on board if requested by NMFS and report any injury or mortality within 48 hours of the incident.

The NMFS now has proposed a list of fisheries for 1999 (details in the *Federal Register*, August 11, 1998, pages 42803 - 42819). With regard to the potential for serious injury or mortality of right whales, the three Category I fisheries are proposed to remain in effect. The southeastern U.S. Atlantic shark gillnet fishery is listed as a Category II fishery. Two fisheries, the lobster, crab and fish mixed species trap or pot fishery, and the herring and mackerel stop seine or weir fishery, are listed as Category III fisheries. The comment period

ended November 9.

### **Stellwagen Bank Sanctuary will hold Scoping Meetings**

Stellwagen Bank is a remnant left by retreating glaciers in the last Ice Age. Consisting primarily of coarse sand and gravel, the Bank's position at the mouth of Massachusetts Bay forces an upwelling of nutrient-rich water from the Gulf of Maine. This upwelling leads to high productivity and multi-layered food webs with species ranging from single-celled phytoplankton to the great whales. The area was designated the Gerry E. Studds Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary in November 1992 to protect the Bank's rich ecosystems. Consisting of 638 square nautical miles, the Sanctuary is located about 25 miles east of Boston between Cape Cod and Cape Ann, Massachusetts.

The Marine Sanctuaries Division of NOAA will hold a series of scoping meetings to gather information on the type and significance of issues related to the management of the Sanctuary. One of those issues is certain to be the regulation of whale watching activities. The information obtained through the scoping meetings will be used in the review of the Sanctuary's current management plan (completed in July 1993), evaluating progress towards achieving the goals established for the Sanctuary and making revisions to the plan and regulations as necessary to fulfill the purposes and policies of the National Marine Sanctuaries Act.

The public is invited to attend the scoping meetings, which will be held on December 8 in Barnstable, December 9 in Gloucester and December 10 in Boston. (See Calendar of Events, page 14, for times and specific locations). For more information about the meetings, contact the Sanctuary at 508-747-1691, e-mail: [bbarr@ocean.nos.noaa.gov](mailto:bbarr@ocean.nos.noaa.gov)

### **Whale-Watching Ethics Forum Scheduled for January 6**

The Center for Coastal Studies and the Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary are co-sponsoring a forum to examine the existing guidelines that protect whales in the northeast from whale watchers. The meeting, "Whale-Watching Ethics, A Coastal Solutions Initiative Forum," will examine current activities and future trends in light of the existing whale-watching guidelines (established by the Northeast Regional Office of the National Marine Fisheries Service) and will discuss improvements that may be needed to insure that the highest standards possible are set to protect the whales while allowing whale watching to continue. Specific topics to be covered during the forum include New England whale-watching guidelines, industry perspectives, whale-watching trends, beyond the guidelines,

research and rules of the road.

Motivations for the forum include two recent collisions with whales by whale-watching boats (a humpback in August and a minke in September), calls for additional regulations by conservation organizations including the Center for Marine Conservation and GreenWorld, rapidly-increasing use of high-speed vessels and an ever-increasing number of commercial and recreational whale watchers in the northeast. Whale protective measures, including the possible need for additional regulation, will also be addressed in revisions to the management plan for Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary (see previous article).

For further information and to register for the forum, contact Joanne Jarzowski at the Center for Coastal Studies, tel. 508-487-2038; e-mail: [solution@coastalstudies.org](mailto:solution@coastalstudies.org)

### **UGA Plans to Exhibit Baby Right Whale**

The University of Georgia Marine Sciences Program plans to exhibit the skeleton of a baby right whale that washed ashore on Little St. Simons Island, Georgia, in December 1981. The specimen, originally on display at the Savannah Science Museum, was recently transferred to the University of Georgia Natural History Museum to be part of its permanent collection.

The stranding of this baby in the winter was one of the initial pieces of evidence that convinced researchers with the New England Aquarium and the University of Rhode Island to investigate the waters of the southeastern United States as a possible calving ground for the northern right whale. The area off Little St. Simons Island south to Sebastian Inlet, Florida, is now the only known calving ground for the species and is protected by federal regulation as "critical habitat." The story of the stranding is included in Bruce Lombardo's recent book, *Chew Toy of the Gnat Gods ñ Reflections on the Wildlife of the Southeast Coast* (1998, Cherokee Publishing Co., Atlanta, GA).

### **Video about Reducing Entanglements Available from Maine/NH Sea Grant**

A new video, "Whales and Fishermen: A Plan for Reducing Entanglements," seeks to enlist fishermen in the plan to reduce the incidental take of large whales in fishing gear. The 11-minute video includes footage of the four large whales frequently seen in the Gulf of Maine: humpback, fin, minke and right whales. Saying "you are the eyes of the ocean," the video asks fishermen to help scientists collect accurate information about entangled whales. Field identification characters for the four species are provided, along with instructions about what to do when encountering an entangled whale. Some information is also provided on interim



gear regulations and efforts to find out what works and what doesn't, again encouraging fishermen to participate. Supplementing the video are two flyers, "Marine mammals & commercial fisheries: Understanding incidental take reduction efforts" and "Whale sightings and science: how you can help." The video was produced by the Maine/New Hampshire Sea Grant College Program and the Department of Public Affairs of the University of Maine. Funding was provided by the National Marine Fisheries Service, the Center for Coastal Studies and the New England Aquarium.

Copies of the video and flyers can be obtained for \$15.00 from Sea Grant Extension, University of Maine, 5715 Coburn Hall, #22, Orono, ME 04469-5715; tel. 207-581-1440.

### **Navy Produces Educational Materials on Right Whales**

Jerry Wallmeyer and the Environmental Management Department of the U.S. Navy base in Jacksonville, Florida, have produced some excellent educational materials on right whales and other marine species in southeastern waters. They have produced a 21-minute video entitled "Sharing the ocean—the U.S. Navy protecting marine life in the southeastern United States." The purpose of the video is to increase the awareness of Navy personnel of right whales, sea turtles and other species in southeastern waters. A companion sheet, "You can help protect threatened and endangered species in southeastern U. S. waters" reinforces the video's message and illustrates the five species of marine turtles and six species of large whales found in the southeast. Copies of the materials are limited, but information on their availability may be obtained from COMNAVBASE Jacksonville, Environmental Management Department, N4, Jacksonville, FL 32212-0102; tel. 904-542-5216; e-mail: [njnw5@navtap.navy.mil](mailto:njnw5@navtap.navy.mil)

### **Right Whale GIS Workshop Scheduled**

Last spring, the Southeastern U. S. Implementation Team established an ad hoc subcommittee to examine the desirability of creating a geographic information system (GIS) for right whales. The subcommittee met on July 24 to learn about Florida's GIS system for manatees and to identify and discuss right whale GIS user needs, management needs, data sources, sharing data and related topics. The subcommittee also developed recommendations for consideration by the Southeastern U. S. Implementation Team. These included (1) defining "GIS" and "Centralized GIS", (2) establishing a right whale GIS working group, and (3) convening a right whale GIS workshop. A summary of the July 24<sup>th</sup> meeting of the right whale GIS subcommittee is available from Wayne McFee, NOAA, National Ocean Service, 217 Fort Johnson Road, Charleston, SC 29412; tel. 803-762-8592; e-mail:

[wayne.mcfee@noaa.gov](mailto:wayne.mcfee@noaa.gov)

At its October meeting, the Southeast U.S. Implementation Team discussed GIS as a tool to address such issues as ship traffic in relation to right whale distribution, and unanimously endorsed the convening of a GIS workshop. One of the issues to be addressed at the workshop will be the geographic scope of the GIS, with some arguing in favor of starting with the Southeast and others advocating the western North Atlantic. The workshop will be held in St. Petersburg, Florida, on December 14 and 15. Dr. John Reynolds has agreed to facilitate. For further information on the December workshop, contact Barb Zoodsma at 912-264-7218; e-mail: Barbz@mail.dnr.state.ga.us

## **Massachusetts Environmental Trust**

### **Supports Additional Right Whale Projects for FY99**

The Massachusetts Environmental Trust continues its support of efforts on behalf of the northern right whale. In September, the Trust awarded three grants totaling over \$75,000 for research on right whales in fiscal year 1999.

The International Wildlife Coalition will receive a grant, funded through the Trust's New Alliances Program, to support their work employing a collaborative approach to solving conflict between endangered whales and commercial fisheries. The project will address fishing gear related deaths of endangered large whales including the northern right whale. The research seeks to expand an existing research alliance among conservationists, fishermen and scientists to modify fishing gear to reduce the risk and consequences of right whale entanglement.

The Trust also will support the Center for Coastal Studies' three-year study of right whale habitat use and food web studies in Cape Cod Bay critical habitat. The project is designed to produce a first-ever food web description of the ecosystem that seasonally supports a significant part of the remaining population of right whales in the North Atlantic. It is also designed to provide data needed for a description of the relationship between the oceanography of the area, the occurrence of primary and secondary planktonic producers, the structure of the food patches, and the right whales' behavior and distribution. Funds for this project came from the Trust's Threatened and Endangered Species Program.

The Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution will receive support from the Trust's Directed Grants Program for a project using an acoustic recording tag to measure right whale responses to an approaching vessel. The primary goal of the research is to study the precise behavioral problems that put right whales at risk for vessel collision. It involves right whale biologists and bio-acousticians working with fishers and fishing vessels to conduct controlled vessel approaches with right whales, using acoustic recording tags to record the

acoustic stimuli from the vessel and to record how the whale responds to these stimuli.

Information on the Trust's FY2000 programs including a request for response will be available in January, 1999. Contact Ann Zulkoski at MET, 33 Union Street, 4<sup>th</sup> floor, Boston, MA 02108; tel. 617-727-0249.

### **Predicting Right Whale Distribution Discussed in Woods Hole Workshop**

*By Phil Clapham, Northeast Fisheries Science Center, 166 Water Street, Woods Hole, MA 02543; tel. 508-495-2316; e-mail: [phillip.clapham@noaa.gov](mailto:phillip.clapham@noaa.gov)*

The Northeast Fisheries Science Center hosted a symposium and multi-disciplinary workshop entitled Predicting Right Whale Distribution on October 1 and 2 in Woods Hole. The intent of the workshop was to discuss whether predicting the distribution of right whales from real-time environmental data (such as satellite images of surface temperature) is a viable undertaking. Development of such a predictive system would enhance the efficiency (and therefore cost effectiveness) of survey efforts, would potentially allow for the identification of currently unknown right whale habitats, and would greatly assist in efforts to mitigate human-related mortality from entanglement and ship strikes.

The workshop was attended by 31 participants from a variety of disciplines, including biological oceanography, physical oceanography, ecosystem modeling, management and right whale biology. Past and current efforts to examine this issue were reviewed, together with characteristics of known habitats, appropriateness of available statistical and modeling approaches, and relevant aspects of the biology of right whales and their principal prey. Several potentially productive avenues of investigation were identified, including: several retrospective studies attempting to link right whale distribution (notably major shifts therein) to changes in specific environmental parameters; work to remotely identify those oceanographic features likely to lead to concentrations of acceptable prey; field work to ground truth predictive systems; and energetics studies.

Overall, while the workshop did not provide definitive answers, it served to identify potentially productive directions for future work and to establish some important contacts between interested individuals. A copy of the proceedings of the workshop is expected to be available in late December.

### **Offshore Surveys for Right Whales, Summer, 1998**

*By Phil Clapham, Northeast Fisheries Science Center, Moira Brown, Center for Coastal Studies and Deb Tobin, East Coast Ecosystems*

The offshore distribution of right whales from Cape Hatteras, North Carolina to Cape

Breton, Nova Scotia, was studied during the summer of 1998 using dedicated shipboard and aerial surveys. Survey tracks were designed based upon historic sighting data, and included areas from Northeast Channel to Western Bank south and east of Nova Scotia. The following surveys were conducted: (i) East Coast Ecosystems (ECE) aerial survey (Cessna Skymaster; Bay of Fundy to Northeast Channel and east to Western Bank); (ii) Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC) aerial survey (Twin Otter; general cetacean assessment survey from Cape Hatteras to Cape Breton from the coastline to the 40-fathom isobath near the shelf break, with additional blocks in La Have/Emerald Basin and Emerald/Western Banks); and (iii) NEFSC shipboard (NOAA Ship Delaware II; Northeast Channel to Western Bank, with specific survey blocks in La Have/Emerald Basin and Emerald/Western Banks, and along the 100-fathom isobath as far east as Dawson Canyon).

The ECE surveys saw no right whales outside the Bay of Fundy. The NEFSC aerial survey observed three right whales, one off Lurcher Shoal and two just south of Emerald Basin. The NEFSC shipboard survey recorded 10 sightings of 11 right whales. Of these, three sightings were in or near Emerald basin, while the remainder were concentrated close to the 100-fathom isobath approximately 15 miles south of Emerald Bank. Three right whales were individually identified; matches to the North Atlantic Right Whale Catalogue revealed that all three were known animals (Catalogue numbers 1019, 1266 and 1933). These surveys indicate that: (1) the apparent abandonment of Browns Bank/Roseway Basin off southeast Nova Scotia which began in 1992 has continued; and (2) the central Scotian Shelf (the La Have/Emerald region), known to be historically important but not surveyed since 1972, remains a habitat for right whales today.

## **Right Whale Consortium Reorganizes**

The North Atlantic Right Whale Consortium was formed in 1986 by the late Howard Winn of the University of Rhode Island and the late John Prescott of the New England Aquarium. The primary purposes of the consortium were to bring researchers and research institutions together to collaborate on both research and funding for right whales. Operating informally for years, the consortium is now reorganizing around the theme that, in spite of all that is being done for right whales, we are still losing them. The reorganization includes a new mission statement, officers, a steering committee, members, protocols for access to data and other details. The results of the reorganization will be described in the next issue of Right Whale News. In the meantime, for further information, contact Marylyn Marx, Consortium secretary, at 617-973-6584.

## **Kelp Gulls Harass Southern Right Whales**

By Vicky Rowntree, Director, Right Whale Program, Whale Conservation Institute, Lincoln, MA 01773

Southern right whales (*Eubalaena australis*) are being harassed by Kelp Gulls (*Larus dominicanus*) on their nursery ground at Peninsula Valdes, Argentina. In the 1970s gulls took peeling skin from the whales' backs. Around 1980 they began to dive onto the whales and gouge out pieces of skin and blubber (Thomas 1988). By 1990, 32% of the whales had 5 - 20cm lesions on their backs as a result of gull attacks. When the gulls attack, they often aim for the lesions, enlarging them through the period of the nursery season. The lesions themselves appear less of a threat than the whales' response to the gull attacks. When a whale is attacked it arches its back, submerges and swims away rapidly underwater. The gull often flies overhead and resumes the attack when the whale next surfaces to breathe. In 1995, mother-calf pairs that were attacked spent over three hours traveling at medium to fast speeds compared to less than one hour for mother-calf pairs that were not attacked. Almost one quarter of a mother's day was spent in states of gull-induced disturbance (Rowntree et al., 1998). This increased energy expenditure comes at a time when the mothers are largely fasting. Blubber reserves that were accumulated to feed calves are being spent fleeing gull attacks. It seems likely that calves are the individuals most seriously affected by the gull attacks.

The gull harassment problem at the Península continues to escalate. In 1997, the frequency of gull attacks was approximately 1.7 times higher than 1995. There is some evidence that the whales may have changed their distribution as a result of the harassment. They have moved away from a bay that was one of their centers of concentration in the 1970s, the same bay where the gull attack behavior appears to have originated and where the attacks were most intense in 1995. Gull harassment has created a problem in monitoring the population. Females with calves are spending most of their time resting underwater rather than at the surface, making it difficult to photograph their callosity patterns and to document their presence and the fact that they calved.

Feeding on skin and blubber appears to be a learned behavior. In 1995, almost half of the gulls attacking the whales were juveniles. The behavior has spread rapidly. In the early 1980s, it was seen only in one bay but by 1995 it was seen throughout the the regions where the whales concentrate. The Kelp Gull population has grown rapidly, probably in response to the increase of food available at waste disposal sites and fish processing plants. The Whale Conservation Institute (WCI, Lincoln, MA) is working with scientists and municipal authorities to remedy the problem. In September 1998 Tom Tilas, chairman of the board of WCI and vice-president of Metcalf & Eddy/Aqua Alliance (one of the largest environmental consulting firms in the world) was invited to speak at a regional planning meeting in which he shared his expertise on the construction of waste disposal sites that would exclude gulls and the development of an overall waste management plan for the region. In addition,

literature provided by WCI on successful gull control programs in the United States was eagerly received. A classroom education program on the problem will begin next year in the four school systems of the region. The program will teach students how to measure the frequency of gull attacks so they can monitor changes from improved waste management. The right whales at Peninsula Valdes are one of the star attractions of its very successful eco-tourism industry. The Argentines have declared right whales a national monument. We hope that the deep interest they show in right whales will help them find a solution to this serious problem involving gulls.

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## Calendar

December 8: Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary scoping meeting, Grossman Commons Building, Cape Cod Community College, Barnstable, MA. See article, page 6.

December 9: Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary scoping meeting, National Marine Fisheries Service office, One Blackburn Drive, Gloucester, MA. See article,

page 6.

December 10: Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary scoping meeting, Stellwagen Bank NMS office, 14 Union Street, Plymouth, MA. See article, page 6.

December 14 - 15, 1998: Right whale GIS workshop, St. Petersburg, FL. See article on page 9.

January 6, 1999: Whale-Watching Ethics forum. 9 AM ñ 5 PM; Massachusetts Maritime Academy, Bourne, MA. See article on page 7.

February 1, 1999: Deadline for submitting responses to *Right Whale News* evaluation questions (see article, page 2). Also the deadline for submitting articles and news for the next issue of *Right Whale News*.

February 4, 1999: Next meeting of the Northeast Whale Implementation Team at the New England Aquarium, Boston, MA. For starting time, directions and other information, contact Dr. Sal Testaverde at 978-281-9368; e-mail: [salvatore.testaverde@noaa.gov](mailto:salvatore.testaverde@noaa.gov)

February 8- 10, 1999: Atlantic Large Whale Take Reduction Team meeting. Location to be determined. For further information, contact Kevin Chu at 508-495-2367; e-mail: [kevin.chu@noaa.gov](mailto:kevin.chu@noaa.gov)

May 6 - 7, 1999: **Tentative** dates for the spring meeting of the Southeastern U.S. Implementation Team for the Recovery of the Northern Right Whale. Location to be determined. To confirm date and location and for further information, contact Barb Zoodsma at 912-264-7218; e-mail [Barbz@mail.dnr.state.ga.us](mailto:Barbz@mail.dnr.state.ga.us)

October 28 - 29, 1999: **Tentative** dates for the fall meeting of the Southeastern U.S. Implementation Team for the Recovery of the Northern Right Whale. Location to be determined. To confirm date and location and for further information, contact Barb Zoodsma at 912-264-7218; e-mail: [Barbz@mail.dnr.state.ga.us](mailto:Barbz@mail.dnr.state.ga.us)

November 28 - December 3, 1999: 13<sup>th</sup> Biennial Conference on the Biology of Marine Mammals. Maui, Hawaii. For more information, contact the Society of Marine Mammalogy at their web site:

<http://pegasus.cc.ucf.edu/~smm>

## ***Right Whale News***

*Right Whale News* is the newsletter of both the Southeastern U.S. Implementation Team for the Recovery of the Northern Right Whale and the Northeast Whale Implementation Team. The editor is Hans Neuhauser. The editorial board consists of Bill Brooks, Moe Brown, Scott Kraus, Mike Payne and Jerry Wallmeyer.

The Grayís Reef National Marine Sanctuary, the Massachusetts Environmental Trust, the Southeast Regional Office of the National Marine Fisheries Service and the Northeast Whale Implementation Team have underwritten the costs of *Right Whale News*. Thanks to their support, *Right Whale News* is published quarterly and is distributed free of charge.

An **index** of the first five years of *Right Whale News* (1994-1998) has been prepared and is available along with current and **back issues** on the Internet, thanks to Alex Score and the Grayís Reef National Marine Sanctuary. The direct access link is <http://www.skio.peachnet.edu/noaa/rtwh/archive.html>

You can also visit the Sanctuary's web site at:  
<http://www.skio.peachnet.edu/noaa/grnms.html>



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