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Aquatic Species at Risk - North Atlantic Right Whale

At a glance

Named the 'right' whale by whalers because it is slow-moving and easy to catch, this whale had been hunted to near extinction by the late 1800s. In 1935, the League of Nations banned hunting of right whales in all oceans; the species was designated as 'endangered' by both the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) in 1990 and the Species at Risk Act (SARA). Currently their population is around 425 animals.

About right whales

Right whales live at least 75 years. They are inquisitive and seldom wary of boats or divers. They are also very acrobatic, often breaching and smacking the surface with their flippers and flukes. Right whales generally dive for approximately 20 minutes.

Right whales do not follow any set migratory schedule or route, but generally move north in the summer and south in the winter, travelling in groups of five or six.

Female right whales bear young every two to six years. Calves form a strong bond with their mothers, and nurse for between one and two years. Calves remain close to their mothers until they reach sexual maturity at approximately 10 years of age.

Right whales are specialized predators. In the Bay of Fundy they feed on tiny crustaceans called copepods. As with other baleen whales, such as the humpback, the right whale has no teeth; instead it has a series of fringed plates—called baleen plates—hanging from each side of its upper jaw. During feeding, a right whale swims slowly along with its mouth open. When the whale closes its mouth, the water is forced out and the baleen plates act as filters, trapping food on the inside ready to be swallowed.

How to recognize a right whale

The right whale has a huge head that takes up nearly a quarter of the length of its stocky, black body. In front of the whale's blowholes, are crusty white, orange, yellowish and pink lumps called callosities. The largest of these lumps is called the bonnet. Each whale has a very distinctive callosity pattern that enables scientists to recognize individual whales easily.



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Right whales, which can grow up to 18 metres in length, have narrow tails, large flippers and no dorsal fin. Females are generally larger than males. The whales' skin is black and occasionally mottled with white patches on throat and belly.

Where the right whale lives

Right whales inhabit the temperate and sub-polar waters of the Atlantic. The whale is commonly seen in the Bay of Fundy, the Western Scotian Shelf and the Gulf of St. Lawrence, but is also found off the coasts of Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and Labrador. Both the Roseway Basin ([see map](#)) and Fundy Basin ([see map](#)) are designated as critical habitats for the right whale.

Why it's at risk

For reasons we still don't fully understand, right whales produce wildly-fluctuating numbers of calves. In the 1999/2000 calving season, for instance, only one new calf was sighted. In 2008/2009, a record 39 calves were seen. Such an uneven birthrate makes it hard for scientists to determine if right whales are producing enough calves to maintain the species.

Increased ocean-going traffic has led to more frequent collisions with boats and exposure to significantly higher numbers of oil spills. Right whales can become entangled in fishing gear and drown. Others may die slowly from infected injuries. Underwater noise pollution from oil and gas exploration, marine development and military exercises might damage the whales' hearing and cause stress. Additionally, pollution may be a contributing factor in the whales' low birthrates.

What's being done

The North Atlantic right whale is listed as endangered and protected under the *Species at Risk Act* (SARA). A [Recovery Strategy](#) has been developed for this species. The whale is also protected under a number of other Acts, regulations and agreements.

To successfully implement the Recovery Strategy, the federal government will continue to work

with researchers and scientists from the academic community, and with representatives from the fishing, shipping and tourism industries along Canada's East Coast.

Since the designation of the critical habitats work has been completed to reduce vessel traffic in these areas to prevent vessel strikes. DFO also has provided training to fishery officers on disentanglements and purchased gear and tools to help with the process.

What can you do?

Right whales will get the protection they need only if all Canadians work together to reduce threats. Find out more about right whales and be aware of human-induced threats. Do your best to reduce these threats wherever possible to better protect the whales' critical habitat. Get involved with the [Habitat Stewardship Program for Species at Risk](#) (HSP) or another conservation organization.

For more information, visit the SARA Registry Website at www.SARAREgistry.gc.ca

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