



The Society for Marine Mammalogy

<http://www.marinemammalogy.org>

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Dear Sirs,

I am writing to you regarding the conservation of North Atlantic right whales, one of the world's most endangered species. I do so in my capacity as President of the Society for Marine Mammalogy, the world's largest professional group dedicated to the study of marine mammals. Our membership consists of approximately 2,000 scientists from more than 25 countries and our goal is to facilitate the understanding and promote the conservation of marine mammals and the ecosystems that support them.

I would like to begin by commending the Government of Canada for its recent actions to expand vessel speed restrictions, increase aerial survey coverage and adjust the triggers for emergency closures of fixed gear fisheries in the Gulf of St Lawrence. These actions are necessary but not sufficient to be effective in the time period required to ensure the future existence of North Atlantic right whales, given the scientific data available and lessons learned from responding to other imperiled marine mammal species.



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I would like to make you aware that:

1. The deaths of eight right whales in 2019, and 28 since 2017, represent a significant decline that increases the risk of extinction of this species, which now stands at under 450 individuals. A recent analysis of causes of death in North Atlantic right whales drew the remarkable conclusions that (a) no “natural” deaths of these animals have been documented for the past 16 years and (b) more adult whales have died than juveniles and calves combined¹. This is, quite simply, a demographic recipe for extinction. Since the Society for Marine Mammalogy was formed in 1981, we have experienced the extinction of the baiji (a dolphin endemic to the Yangtze River) and we are witnessing the imminent extinction of a second species, the vaquita (a porpoise endemic to the upper Gulf of California). In 1997, there were more than 500 vaquitas in Mexico’s Gulf of California; today perhaps fewer than a dozen individuals remain. Unless we can greatly reduce or eliminate the human-caused mortality of right whales, this iconic species will follow the sad trajectories of these other cetacean species.

2. We already understand the broad elements required to conserve right whales. In areas where the animals occur, we need to slow vessel speeds to reduce the probability of right whales being struck and we need to greatly reduce, or preferably eliminate, vertical lines used with fixed fishing gear. We understand the complexities of implementing these conservation actions in areas of high vessel traffic and fishing effort, but such actions are necessary if we are going to prevent human-caused right whale deaths. The species is simply too vulnerable; we no longer have the luxury of taking an incremental and reactionary approach, by which layers of protection can be added as more deaths are documented. In addition to the current bilateral management plans, strong protective measures must be adopted wherever aggregations of right whales occur. This requires sufficient survey effort to detect and monitor aggregations, using whatever survey mode (passive acoustic or visual) is most efficient, as well as enhanced habitat and distribution modeling.

3. Although this whale species once ranged across the North Atlantic, intense, historic commercial hunting now limits its distribution primarily to the waters of eastern Canada and the United States. The North Atlantic right whale played an important role in the history of both countries, providing First Nations peoples and early visitors to North America with food, oil, and baleen. Now it is our turn to take the critical steps needed to conserve this species. Surely two of the wealthiest and most technologically advanced countries in the world can work together to ensure the survival of this species. We know that managers and scientists from both countries are already working hard to protect right whales but, as always, we offer the scientific expertise of our membership to assist your conservation efforts.

Saving the North Atlantic right whale requires immediate *and* sustained bilateral actions to eliminate human-caused mortality. It also requires forward-thinking planning to ensure that appropriate protections are in place for right whales as they respond to a rapidly changing environment.

Thank you for considering our Society’s concerns on this important matter.

Sincerely,

D. Ann Pabst
President

¹ Sharp, S., et al. 2019. Gross and histopathological diagnoses from North Atlantic right whale (*Eubalaena glacialis*) mortalities between 2003 and 2018. *Diseases of Aquatic Organisms* 135: 1–31.



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