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Newborn right whale in Cape Cod Bay fights for survival

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Plymouth-based Whale and Dolphin Conservation fights to protect this vulnerable species



Whale and Dolphin Conservation. Image acquired under authorization of NOAA/NMFS.

The mother and calf North Atlantic right whales that were discovered in Cape Cod Bay by Whale and Dolphin Conservation (WDC) on January 12th are up against major challenges. While WDC and their peers fight to protect the dwindling species their attention and concern is directed to the newborn and its mother that have made an unexpected choice of habitat this winter.

With fewer than 500 individuals remaining, this species and their survival is in jeopardy. The recovery of the North Atlantic right whale is impeded by vessel strikes, fishing gear entanglements, habitat degradation, and climate change. In addition to being in a much colder region than the known calving grounds off Florida and Georgia, this vulnerable calf, estimated to be less than two weeks old, was seen swimming within a mile of operational nuclear power plant, inside of active fishing grounds, and not far from shipping lanes.

The presence of this mother and calf raise both hopes and concerns. "None of us would have ever expected to locate a mother calf pair in Cape Cod Bay in January. This sighting is a reminder that right whales need to be protected where they actually are, not where historic sightings say they will be," said Regina Asmutis-Silvia, WDC Executive Director. "We still have so much to learn about them, expanding the ship strike rule and designated critical habitat are important steps to saving these extremely vulnerable animals."

Changes in the environment may also be a contributing factor to this unusual sighting. "The Cape Cod Bay habitat appears to be changing dramatically and there is some question as to whether the habitat change is in response to changes in condition along the entire east coast" said Dr. Charles "Stormy" Mayo, Senior Scientist at the Provincetown Center for Coastal Studies (PCCS). "There is a real question as to whether this changing environment will be nurturing to mother and calves."

According to Karen Vale, Campaign Manager for Cape Cod Bay Watch, discharge from the nuclear power plant should also be considered both as a reason for the location of the sighting and as a concern for the animals. "The Pilgrim Nuclear Power Station pumps water up to 32°F warmer into the bay on a daily basis. Measurable impacts from climate change have already occurred in Massachusetts, and the thermal pollution generated by Pilgrim can only be adding to the temperature increase in the bay. In addition, the facility entrains billions of plankton every year - some species that are prey for right whales - and discharges polluted water into the right whales' supposed protected habitat."

WDC is leading the way to engage the public in the Act Right Now: Help Save a Species - North Atlantic Right Whale. The Act Right Now movement is focused on engaging the public in the efforts to expand and enforce the protection for this species. Everyone can play an active part in saving the North Atlantic right whale at www.whales.org.

"This vulnerable and innocent pair needs all the help they can get. I encourage everyone to visit whales.org to Act Right Now and sign the petition on whales.org to protect this species." Pleads Act Right Now Campaign Lead, Sue Rocca.

More on the location of the mother and calf right whales:

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WDC, Whale and Dolphin Conservation responded to a call to evaluate a potential stranded whale in Plymouth Harbor on Saturday January 12, 2013. WDC crew was stunned and amazed to find, instead, what appeared to be a seemingly healthy North Atlantic right whale mother and newborn calf near Plymouth harbor. After acquiring proper permit authorization to approach, WDC evaluated the pair, collected photographic evidence and alerted researchers at the Provincetown Center for Coastal Studies (PCCS), New England Aquarium (NEAQ), and NOAA. An aerial survey later conducted by PCCS provided a positive identification of the mother as Wart, an adult female that was entangled in fishing gear from 2007 to 2010. The PCCS disentanglement team had made six attempts over three years to remove a life-threatening entanglement and, prior to this sighting, she was last seen in May 2010, after being disentangled.

North Atlantic right whale background

The North Atlantic right whale is one of the world's most endangered large whales, with an estimated population of less than 500 individuals. In fact, the National Marine Fisheries Service ("NMFS") has previously stated that the "loss of even a single individual may contribute to the extinction of the species."

The North Atlantic right whale was decimated by commercial whaling in past centuries, and despite being protected by the Endangered Species Act since 1970, has not recovered.

North Atlantic right whales, reaching 55 feet in length, migrate from their calving grounds off the southeastern United States to their feeding grounds off the northeastern United States and Canada.

Adult female right whales reproduce slowly, giving birth to one calf every four years and not reaching reproductive maturity until age 8.

The primary threats to imperiled right whales are ship strikes, entanglement in commercial fishing gear, habitat degradation, rising noise levels, global warming, ocean acidification and pollution.

- ▶ WDC, Whale and Dolphin Conservation, (formerly WDCCS) is the leading global charity dedicated to the conservation and protection of whales and dolphins. We defend these remarkable creatures against the many threats they face through campaigns, advising governments, conservation projects, field research and rescue.
- ▶ WDC's North American office is based in Plymouth, MA. WDC staff, volunteers and interns conduct research and work to protect whales from the threats they face. Visit www.whales.org to learn more about how you can help as a volunteer, advocate, or donor.

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