



U.S.: New Survey Doubles Estimated North Pacific Right Whale Population posted on 10/08/04

By Geoffrey Gluckman, AquaNews Correspondent



An elusive North Pacific right whale slips beneath the surface of the Bering Sea. A recent survey indicates these critically endangered whales may be rebounding from the edge of extinction.

Photo: NOAA

In an astounding recent discovery, scientists working for the National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) have located twice as many North Pacific right whales (*Eubalaena japonica*) as previously estimated.

"We saw more right whales in the Bering Sea than have been documented in the last five years combined," said Robert Pitman, NOAA Fisheries marine scientist. "More importantly, we also saw three cow-and-calf pairs. Not only is the population bigger than we thought, but it may actually be growing."

North Pacific right whales may be one of the most endangered large whale species in the world. Dubbed the "right whale" to hunt because they were slow moving and floated after being killed, whalers hunted them to near-extinction in the 1800's. In 1931, right whales received international protection under the Convention for the Regulation of Whaling, which prohibited takes of these endangered animals. Nevertheless, during the 1960's, illegal commercial whaling by foreign vessels further lowered the already endangered population levels.

The recent sightings boost the estimated population from 13 to 25 individuals residing in the south-eastern part of the Bering Sea. Guided by satellite tags placed on two of the whales in August of this year, researchers were able to track a group of them, resulting in the collection of 20 biopsies. These eraser-sized snippets of skin and blubber yielded unique genetic records, identifying each individual whale in the group and allowing scientists to assess the population based on gender and other factors.

Unlike the related North Atlantic and southern-hemisphere right whales, little is known about North Pacific right whales. Since 1900, there have only been 15 documented winter sightings of the whales in their typical habitat. Prior to the summer of 1996, no one knew where in the eastern North Pacific they could be reliably found. Answers to questions about where they spend winters and what migratory route they take, remain unknown.

In an effort to solve some of these right whale mysteries, scientists from the Cetacean Assessment and Ecology Program (CAEP) within the National Marine Mammal Laboratory have employed satellite tags, which track the whales more easily than acoustic equipment. It also allows researchers to establish protected areas worldwide by revealing the areas of the oceans where these whales roam.

Recently, collaborations between conservationists and their adversaries, industry groups, have implemented more sustainable fishing practices, such as **whale-friendly lobster traps**, which further protect whales, especially those in the North Atlantic. Efforts are also being made to determine the **effect of marine noise**, including military sonar usage and recreational vehicle disturbance, on whales and other ocean life.

The results of the recent NOAA Fisheries survey further demonstrate an encouraging trend that

may indicate the whales are bouncing back from the brink of extinction. "In 2002, scientists documented a sighting of a right whale calf in the Bering Sea for the first time in more than a century," said retired Navy Vice Admiral Conrad C. Lautenbacher, Ph.D., under secretary of commerce for oceans and atmosphere and NOAA administrator.

"Although Bering Sea right whales remain severely endangered, each new individual whale we find - especially a calf - gives us hope for their survival," he added.



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His espionage novel, Deadly Exchange, will be available Fall 2004.

Source: Vancouver Aquarium Marine Science Centre

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