

# A Move to the Right

by Scott D. Kraus

## A collaborative effort for the rarest whale



Its origins are lost in the dawn of cetological history. The idea of a cooperative effort to launch broad-based studies on the biology of an endangered species has been long preached and rarely practiced. For right whales it became a matter of necessity due to their extremely small population size and absence of any convincing recovery. The birth of the North Atlantic Right Whale Consortium was the result of this need, and the efforts of a number of scientists, notably Howard Winn of the University of Rhode Island, and John Prescott of the New England Aquarium.

Through the consortium, a unique collaboration is underway to study the biology, natural history, and conservation needs of the north Atlantic right whale. Researchers from the New England Aquarium, the University of Rhode Island, the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, the Center for Coastal Studies, and Marineland of Florida, in conjunction with the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) northeast center at Woods Hole, have embarked upon an ambitious 5 year program to fill in the extensive and critical gaps in our understanding of right whale biology. The consortium is also relying heavily for information on a number of contributors of sightings and photographs, particularly from whalewatching operations.

The consortium's work has more than a simple academic motivation. For the first time in the history of the Endangered Species Act, NMFS has announced its intention to produce recovery plans for right and humpback whales that occur within U.S. jurisdiction. A recovery plan (as required by the act) is supposed to outline research and management actions that will ensure the survival and recovery of each endangered species. Although plans have been created for a variety of

*Data about right whales encountered in the Bay of Fundy is recorded by researchers from the New England Aquarium, one of the participating organizations in the North Atlantic Right Whale Consortium. (Photo by Scott Kraus)*

plants and animals, no whales have been included to date. The NMFS action is the first step of a long process, but a positive sign that the efforts of a number of conservation groups and scientists are finally being heeded.

The consortium hopes to provide a complete database and many of the methods for answering a number of major questions. Where do most right whales go in the winter? Where do cows go for the two years following their calving years? What are the major migration routes? Is the population growing, declining, or stable? Finally, what can be done to ensure that this remarkable species has the best chance for survival and eventual recovery that we can give it? These and a host of other issues will be addressed by this research program in the near future. The advantages of working collaboratively on this species are already becoming apparent. Consortium members bring to our efforts different areas of expertise, some regional, some topical, but all are bringing the data and viewpoints required to make our work comprehensive.

Despite our concerns about the effects of human activities upon this species, a cautious whalewatching public can make a contribution to this study. Good photographs and incidental sightings of right whales are useful to the right whale consortium. Right whales are individually identifiable by their callosties, and photographs are the basis for most of this research. However, we do not encourage photographs "at any cost." Experienced captains are sensitive to right whale responses to their vessels, and may break off attempts to view



(Photo by Gregory Stone)

individuals if they feel they are disturbing the whales. We recommend that no right whale should be followed at close range (<300m) for more than 15 minutes, and mothers with calves should be treated even more carefully—i.e. no active approach within 100 meters

Any of the consortium members would be interested in receiving sightings that you think have **not been reported** before. Sightings with photographs should be sent to the New England Aquarium Right Whale Project, which is responsible for maintaining the consortium's master catalog of north Atlantic right whales (which currently numbers about 220 animals). All sightings eventually will find their way to computer files being established for NMFS by the University of Rhode Island. We would also be interested in historical records of right whales from the north Atlantic, whether from old newspapers, privately held logbooks, or personal letters; sometimes these can be remarkably helpful in our studies.

We hope that the consortium and its associated contributors will be able to give right whales a better chance than they have had from humans in over one thousand years. With accurate and up-to-date information supplied by the consortium to the U.S. and Canadian governments, protection of the species and its habitats may offer right whales a real chance at recovery.



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(Photo by Scott Kraus)