

# THE HEAT IS ON

Species feeling the effects of climate change



## North Atlantic Right Whale

*Eubalaena glacialis*

### Region:

Atlantic Ocean

### Area affected:

Gulf of St. Lawrence and New England coast

### Climatic change:

Warming oceans

### Impact:

Mortality

### ABOUT THIS SPECIES

With fewer than 450 remaining, North Atlantic right whales are critically imperiled. They are listed as “endangered” under the Endangered Species Act and are also protected under the Marine Mammal Protection Act. Right whales migrate along the Atlantic coast from their feeding areas near Canada and northern New England to their calving range off Georgia and Florida. This whale has a stocky, black body with no dorsal fin and measures 50 feet long and weighs about 70 tons. North Atlantic right whales eat up to 2,600 pounds of zooplankton per day, filtered through large baleen plates in their mouths.

### DESCRIPTION OF IMPACT

The zooplankton that North Atlantic right whales depend on are found primarily in cool waters. The Gulf of Maine has historically been an important feeding area. However, as the region has warmed, whales are now found farther north, near Nova Scotia in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, likely due to better prey conditions. Unfortunately, this shift in range is putting them in danger, because the protections that have successfully reduced mortality from entanglement in fishing gear and collisions with large ships—the two biggest threats to right whales—are based on the whales’ historical migration patterns, not their new movements. Canada and the United States have implemented fisheries closures and rerouted commercial shipping lanes to help avoid collisions, and the United States has also put speed limits on large ships. But with right whales now apparently traveling at times and to areas without protections, deaths are on the rise again. **In 2017, ship strikes or entanglements caused the deaths of 12 North Atlantic right whales in the Gulf of St. Lawrence and five in U.S. waters.** This is an unsustainably high level of mortality for such a small population. Canada quickly implemented ship speed limits and fishing restrictions in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, and the United States is investigating ways to lower the mortality from entanglements, but not much time is left to save the North Atlantic right whale from extinction.

### References

Defenders of Wildlife. Basic Facts about Right Whales. <https://defenders.org/north-atlantic-right-whale/basic-facts>

Friedlander, B. 2017. Climate change, sparse policies endanger right whale population. *Cornell Chronicle*. November 3. <http://news.cornell.edu/stories/2017/11/climate-change-sparse-policies-endanger-right-whale-population>



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