

# RIGHT WHALE NEWS

*An independent forum for right whale conservation and recovery,  
published several times each year.*

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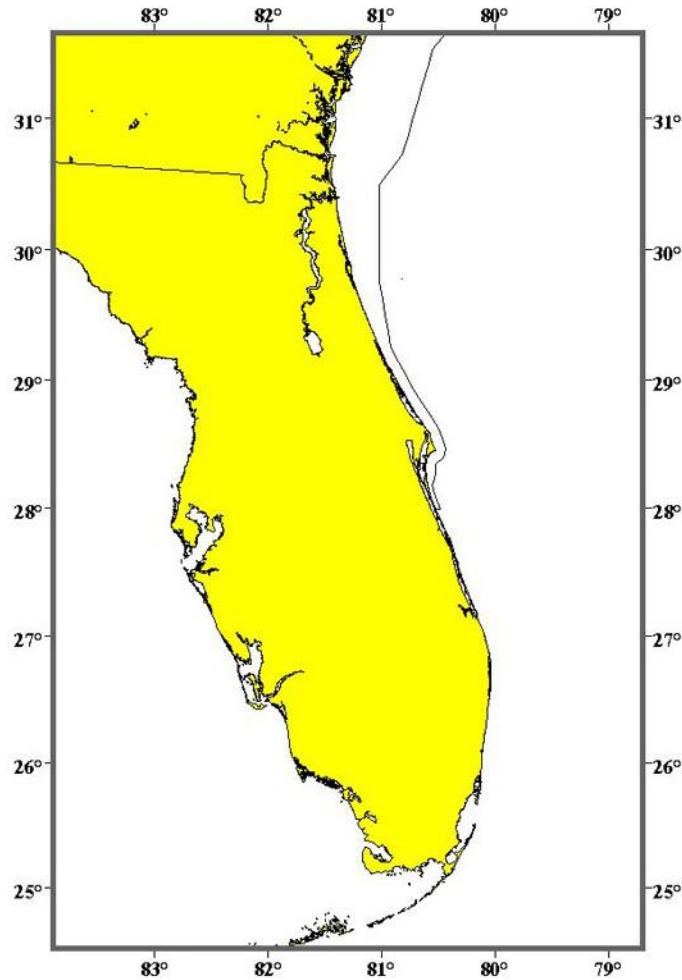
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## **Report from the Southeastern U.S.: Not Good**

The news from the Florida right whale calving and wintering ground is in, and it's not good. Unlike the "old days" (prior to 2011) when nearly 200 right whales were reported from the coastal waters of southeastern Georgia and northeastern Florida, in 2017, there were seven! And, where scientists estimate about 25 calves might be born in a given year, in 2017 there were three! This has all occurred despite relatively good weather and good survey conditions. Despite this disheartening news, the search effort has continued—with surveys flown by three teams: Georgia Department of Natural Resources, St. Simons Island, Georgia; Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission, St. Augustine, Florida; and the Marineland Right Whale Project, Marineland, Florida. In addition, a shore-based volunteer sighting network (Marineland Right Whale Project and the Marine Resources Council, Palm Bay, Florida) continued their daily lookouts.

Scientists and volunteers alike are scratching their heads. The last sighting was on 8 February, of a mother-calf pair, Catalog #2614, *Tripelago*, and her 4th calf, about 9 miles east of Amelia Island. Another mother-calf pair, #1711 and her 3rd calf, provided an additional curiosity. First seen by the Georgia team on 1 January, this pair arrived on the calving grounds, traveled south unseen, and re-appeared in New Smyrna Beach on 10 January. A few days later, on 14 January, Julie Albert (Marine Resources Council) photographed the pair off Satellite Beach. On the following day, 15 January, the pair was sighted off Sebastian Inlet. For several hours that evening, they went under the bridge and into the Inlet. If this sounds familiar, this highly unusual event also occurred on 8–9 February 2016, with mother-calf pair, Catalog #3450, *Clipper*, and her first known calf (see *Right Whale News*, March 2016). Back to the present, our 2017 pair, #1711 and calf, have not been reported since 15 January. These sighting events can be likened to a mirage—the whales appear and disappear—unpredictable and of their own volition. At the same time, these events are influenced by amorphous and interacting layers of external factors.



*Verified right whale sightings during a 10-day period, 27 January through 5 February 2017, centered around 1 February. As has been the practice of Right Whale News, this figure provides a general impression of the numbers and distribution at the approximate mid-point of the season. Yes, the plot is blank! There were no sightings during the period—the first time this has occurred in the several years of presenting this information. The dark line in the upper center is the boundary of the 26 February 2016 revised right whale critical habitat. The collaborative data and survey effort are from the Sea to Shore Alliance, Georgia Department of Natural Resources, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, Marineland Right Whale Project, and the Marine Resources Council.*

There are likely several factors involved. One is temperature. The Southeast Regional Climate Center reported that seasonal temperatures were well above average in the Southeast region. Several locations reported January mean temperatures that were ranked within the top five warmest values on record. For the entire continental United States, February 2017 was the second warmest on record, and Spring weather arrived early (*New York Times*, 8 March 2017). On the broader scale (reported by NOAA), global temperatures for January 2017 were the third warmest, based on 137 years of measurements.

The changes that are occurring with the right whales have raised concerns at the national level. Analyses by scientists at the New England Aquarium, Boston, Massachusetts, and the Northeast Fisheries Science Center, Woods Hole, Massachusetts, indicate that after years of steady but slow population growth for the species, the trend has plateaued. Perhaps more worrisome, the species numbers may be exhibiting a decline. (The current best population estimate is 524 (Right whale report card, at [www.narwc.org](http://www.narwc.org).) To address these concerns, scientists and managers will gather for a three-day workshop in Gloucester, Massachusetts, 14-16 March (see next article).

## **Right Whales Draw Concern: Scientists and Managers to Meet**

In response to increasing concern over the status of the North Atlantic right whale population, a workshop will be held 14-16 March 2017, at the Greater Atlantic Region Fisheries Office, National Marine Fisheries Service, 55 Great Republic Drive, Gloucester, Massachusetts. The meeting will begin in the hearing room around 8:30 AM on Tuesday 14 March, and end around 4:30 or 5:00 PM on Wednesday 15 March.

The purpose of this workshop is to identify and evaluate the factors affecting the abundance of the western population of North Atlantic right whales, and to recommend research strategies for improved population monitoring and reduction in threats. The workshop will consist of oral presentations to an expert panel of 4 individuals, open discussions, and a synthesis of findings. There will be 25-30 invited participants, but the meeting will be open, with periods allocated for public comment.

The objectives of the workshop are to:

1. Identify and evaluate the factors affecting NARW abundance:
  - a. Review recent information about past and present current North Atlantic right whale population vital rates, abundance, and trends in abundance;
  - b. Identify possible reasons for change in population recovery rate
2. Recommend research strategies for improved monitoring
3. Evaluate strengths and knowledge gaps, potential biases and limitations in monitoring of vital rates
  - a. population abundance
  - b. population threats
4. Identify, and develop prioritized list(s) of medium-term (5-15 years) approaches for augmenting data, field studies, and analytical methods (including assessing data precision) to monitor population size, distribution, and vital rates in light of anthropogenic and environmental stressors.

The panelists are: Phillip Clapham, Chair, NOAA; Frances Gulland, Marine Mammal Commission; Jeffrey Runge, Gulf of Maine Research Institute; and Jeremy Collie, University of Rhode Island. The steering committee consists of Richard Methot, Peter Corkoron, Lance Garrison, David Gouveia, Richard Merrick, Gregory Silber, Barb Zoodsma, and Mridula Srinivasan, all NOAA.

The panel, working with the Workshop Steering Committee in a closed session on 16 March, will prepare a workshop report. The report will identify short- and long-term research needed to improve the monitoring of population abundance, health, and demographics; and to inform managers of potential areas of focus to reduce the intensity and severity of threats. The report, an internal document at this stage, will be submitted to NMFS leadership. Subsequently, after about six months, the report will be available to the public.

## **Calendar**

5–7 April 2017. Annual meeting of the Marine Mammal Commission. Sea Crest Beach Hotel, 350 Quaker Road, North Falmouth, Massachusetts. This public meeting will be geared toward addressing some of the biggest marine mammal issues in the Northeast region, including North Atlantic right whales and the increasing gray seal population. Joining the Commission will be speakers and participants from NOAA regional offices and science centers, the fishing and tourism industries, local research and management groups, and community representatives. All sessions are open to the public, except the Wednesday 8–10 am Executive Session. Registration is not required, but it would be helpful if you could advise the Commission via email ([mmc@mmc.gov](mailto:mmc@mmc.gov)) if you plan to attend. Please feel free to contact the Commission with any questions.

12-13 April 2017. Spring meeting of the Southeast U.S. Implementation Team (SEIT). Guana Tolomato Matanzas National Estuarine Research Reserve, Education Center, 505 Guana River Road, Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida. The hotel for this meeting is the Hampton Inn & Suites, 95 Vilano Road, Saint Augustine, Florida, Tel: 904-827-9797. For further information, contact [Thomas.Pitchford@MyFWC.com](mailto:Thomas.Pitchford@MyFWC.com)

23–27 October 2017. 22nd Biennial Conference on the Biology of Marine Mammals. Halifax Convention Center, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. The 2017 North Atlantic Right Whale Consortium (NARWC) Annual Meeting will be held on 22 October 2017 at St. Mary's University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. Additional details will be in future issues of this newsletter.

## Scientific Literature and Reports

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## ***Right Whale News***

*Right Whale News* is a publication of Associated Scientists at Woods Hole. It is disseminated online through the courtesy of the North Atlantic Right Whale Consortium. The Editor is Jim Hain. The editorial board consists of Julie Albert, Robert Kenney, Hans Neuhauser, and Amy Whitt.

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To submit ideas, article topics, and comments, contact Editor Jim Hain at [jhain@earthlink.net](mailto:jhain@earthlink.net) and place “RWN Editorial” in the subject line. To subscribe, please use the new “Mail Chimp” system at: <http://eepurl.com/JvmKf>. The link is also available via the *Right Whale News* tab on [www.narwc.org](http://www.narwc.org).

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An index to *Right Whale News*, subject and author, for the period 2014-2004 is posted at the North Atlantic Right Whale Consortium website, [www.narwc.org](http://www.narwc.org)—under the *Right Whale News* tab. Indexing for the period 2004-1994 is underway.