



New England
Aquarium

MONTH-OLD RIGHT WHALE CALF MUTILATED, KILLED BY SHIP STRIKE

NEARLY HALF OF ALL RIGHT WHALE DEATHS LINKED TO COLLISIONS WITH VESSELS

Coast Guard resists speed restrictions, cites national security

BOSTON, MA. A 15-foot, one-month-old male right whale calf was found floating dead on January 10 by a recreational boater off St. John’s Channel near Jacksonville, Florida. The calf was mutilated, with severed flukes and multiple gashes—indicating he was struck by a ship. This marks the tenth right whale death since February 2004—half of these deaths have been linked to collisions with vessels, the number-one killer of right whales.

Less than 350 critically endangered North Atlantic right whales remain alive today, and each additional death brings this species closer to extinction. Of the 52 right whale deaths reported since 1986, at least 20 of them (39%) were killed by ship strikes. This death rate is likely much higher, as some whales survive the initial collision only to later die from related injuries or infections. Therefore, nearly half of all right whales are killed by ship strikes.

The Mid-Atlantic region is described as an urban or industrial ocean due to the extreme amounts of commercial and recreational ship traffic. Shipping lanes are so dense with traffic in some areas that they resemble congested highways. It is in these busy thoroughways where the right whales bear their calves every winter. Scientists believe that slowing down shipping traffic may help save this species from extinction. However, the U.S. Coast Guard has refused to issue voluntary speed restrictions, citing concerns for national security.

“There are no national security issues around lowering speeds to protect whales,” says New England Aquarium spokesman Tony LaCasse. “Defense related vessels are already exempt from this type of regulation, as they should be. The vast majority of ship traffic in this area is commercial in nature.”

“This is not rocket science,” says Scott Kraus, New England Aquarium senior whale researcher. “This is not even science. It is just common sense. Right whales need these speed restrictions.”

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