

GEORGIA AQUARIUM ANIMAL FACT SHEET

Northern Right Whale

Eubalaena glacialis

Range/Habitat

- The northern right whale is found in coastal and shelf waters, as well as offshore.
- Its range is from Nova Scotia to Florida
- It spends summer months in waters from Cape Cod to Nova Scotia and moves to calving grounds off coasts of Georgia and Florida in the winter months. The whereabouts of much of the population during the autumn are unknown.

Physical Characteristics

- The northern right whale lacks a dorsal fin, has a broad back and paddle-shaped flippers, as well as a huge head and a strongly arched mouth line.
- It is black in color with varying amount of white on the underside.
- The baleen plates in its mouth, numbering between 200 and 260 per side, are huge measuring up to nine feet (2.7 m) long. Baleen is made of a material that is similar to human fingernails in that it is stiff but flexible.
- The head and rostrum are covered with callosities, which are raised, roughened patches of skin with a white to cream coloring. They are located in the same locations as facial hair on human males. The callosities are covered with cyamids or whale lice.
- Females are somewhat longer than males.
- The northern right whale produces a distinctive V-shaped spout of spray when it exhales.
- The average length of a calf is 13 to 15 feet (4 - 5 m) with average weight around 2000 lbs. (910 kg).
- The largest northern right whale recorded was 56 feet (17 m) in length and weighed 200,000 lbs. (90,000 kg).

Diet/Feeding

- The diet of the northern right whale consists exclusively of plankton, such as copepods and occasionally krill.
- It feeds by moving through the water with its mouth wide open, filtering prey through its baleen plates.

Conservation Status

- This northern right whale is listed as “endangered” on the IUCN Red List.
- It is estimated that there are only about 300 individuals remaining.
- The species has been listed as “endangered” by both the Georgia Department of Natural Resources and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Additional Information

- Life span of the northern right whale is known to exceed 70 years.
- It travels singly or in small temporary groups.
- This whale frequently will breach (leap out of the water), lob-tail (slap its tail on the surface of the water) and spy-hop (orient itself vertically with its head and eyes out of the water).
- Occasionally, it is curious enough to approach boats.

- Bellowing sounds and moans are commonly heard at night in breeding areas.
- It is thought that the right whale has excellent hearing, especially at low frequencies.
- Breeding takes place in the late summer and fall. Courtship groups are formed of from three to thirty individuals. These include several males that jostle for position around a female. Females may mate with more than one male in succession or with two simultaneously. The females then migrate from the primary breeding areas off the coast of Nova Scotia to the Georgia and North Florida coast. Scientists are still not sure where the rest of the male population travels during this time.
- Females usually give birth to a single whale calf after at least a 12 month gestation. Young are born at the southern end of the whales' north-south migration routes, off the coast of Georgia and Florida, in the winter months. The calf is about 15 feet (4.6 m) in length at birth. It is usually weaned and independent of the mother towards the end of its first year, although separations as early as six to eight months have been documented. The calf will reach sexual maturity between the ages of 6 to 8 years. Although sexual behavior is observed all year round, the female gives birth only every three to five years. It is believed that copulation in seasons other than winter is social in nature.
- When commercial whale hunting began in the 11th century, the right whale was the "right" whale to hunt because they were slow and easy to catch, floated when dead and yielded a large amount of oil for their size. They were hunted for oil, meat, and apparel materials (for corset stays, umbrella ribs, buggy whips etc.) from the 17th to early 20th centuries.
- It is estimated that in the first four decades of the 20th century, more whales were killed worldwide than in all the previous 400 years due to the advancement of modern whaling ships. Therefore, in 1935 the northern right whale was identified for international protection as its numbers had dwindled to less than 100 individuals. Years passed without a sighting and it was believed that the right whale was extinct. Finally, in January of 1955, an aerial photograph was taken of Cape Code Bay and it confirmed that this species was still alive. Thirty years later scientists discovered evidence of their migratory patterns during the winter months and began to understand more about the species in order to help it survival.
- Today it is estimated that there are only about 300 northern right whales alive. The greatest threats to the species are collisions with ships and entanglements in fishing gear. Efforts are being made by the government, conservation groups and private citizens to minimize both hazards.

Sources

The Northern Right Whale, From Whaling to Watching. Georgia Department of Natural Resources, 1997.

http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/species/mammals/cetaceans/rightwhale_northern.htm

<http://www.new-brunswick.net/new-brunswick/whales/rightwhale.html>