

The New York Times

JULY 24, 2005

Deaths of Rare Whales May Be Underreported, Scientists Say

By The Associated Press

BOSTON, July 23 (AP) - More than 8 in 10 deaths of right whales may be going undiscovered, say marine scientists, who called for emergency action to help prevent humans from accidentally killing them.

In an article published in the journal *Science*, researchers estimated that deaths of North Atlantic right whales may be underreported by as much as 83 percent annually. At least eight whales have died in the last 16 months, and only 350 of the animals are believed to exist.

There is not time for proposed protections to move through the federal legislative process, said Amy Knowlton, a New England Aquarium researcher and one of the article's 18 co-authors.

"We can't wait to deal with a bureaucratic maze," Ms. Knowlton said.

The *Science* article, citing the Endangered Species Act, called for emergency rules to protect against ship strikes and fishing gear entanglements, two primary ways that humans kill right whales.

Proposed rules include slowing down ships in whale-heavy areas and reducing the amount of floating fishing line in the water. Gear and voluntary speed restrictions are

already in place, but the new rules would significantly broaden requirements and improve their effectiveness, advocates say.

"We really do have tangible solutions in hand," Ms. Knowlton said.

Teri Frady, spokeswoman for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Fisheries Service, said rules to protect whales from fishing gear entanglements should be in force by the end of the year and the ship strike rules should be in place by spring of 2006.

"It's not that doing something dramatic isn't possible," Ms. Frady said. "It's figuring out what it's going to be and whether it's going to work."

The proposed rules have been questioned by fishermen, who worry that new whale-safe gear requirements would be too expensive, and by the shipping industry, which says it would lose money and compromise safety by slowing down or altering routes to avoid the animals.

The North Atlantic right whale was nearly hunted out of existence in the late 18th century and has struggled since. Scientists said the eight known whale deaths in the last 16 months were particularly devastating because four were females just starting to bear calves.