

Story: <https://www.pri.org/stories/2021-02-25/little-time-left-save-north-atlantic-right-whale>

Retweet: <https://twitter.com/EndangeredOcean/status/1365179435914199045?s=20>

Little time left to save the North Atlantic right whale

Ship strikes and entanglement in fishing nets threaten the survival of the North Atlantic right whale, one of the world's most endangered species. Conservation groups have now file a lawsuit to compel the US to expand protections for the whales.

[Living on Earth](#)

February 25, 2021 · 3:00 PM EST

Writer [Adam Wernick](#)

After years of petitioning the National Marine Fisheries Service to protect North Atlantic right whales, conservation groups recently filed an emergency lawsuit asking the US government to expand protections for the highly endangered species.

Right whales were once hunted to near extinction, but when hunting was banned in 1935, the population of right whales began to slowly bounce back. Today, the population is again in free fall. Ship strikes and entanglement in fishing gear are killing more right whales each year than are being born. Less than 400 of these giant marine mammals remain, making them a critically endangered species.

Related: [Experts say 'extinction is around the corner' for Atlantic right whales](#)

The National Marine Fisheries Service currently has a rule in place that requires vessels over 65 feet long to slow down in certain areas at certain times of the year to prevent right whales from getting run over and killed by ships. In 2012, the Center for Biological Diversity petitioned the National Marine Fisheries Service to expand the scope of that rule so that it applies in more areas and to smaller vessels.

“The agency has never responded to our petition, despite a host of evidence indicating that the rule, while it's effective in the places and times that it applies, is not effective enough,” says Kristen Monsell, senior attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity.

"[Right whales'] poop is incredibly nutrient rich; it helps to fertilize phytoplankton, which are the base of the food chain. The whales really do sow the seeds of healthy ecosystems."

Kristen Monsell, senior attorney, Center for Biological Diversity

Monsell believes "we can't afford not to enact these protections. Because if we don't, we really risk losing the species forever, and whales provide incredible benefits to the ocean and our planet as a whole. For example, their poop is incredibly nutrient rich; it helps to fertilize phytoplankton, which are the base of the food chain. The whales really do sow the seeds of healthy ecosystems."

In addition, Monsell adds, they also act as carbon sinks. Whales accumulate carbon in their bodies during their lives and when they die, they sink to the bottom of the ocean, taking all that carbon with them.

Now, the Center for Biological Diversity, along with other conservation groups, has filed a lawsuit against the government asking for added protection of North Atlantic right whales. One lawsuit is about vessel strikes, Monsell says.

"Vessel collisions can kill or injure right whales in a few different ways," she explains. "One, through blunt force trauma that can result in fractures or blood clots or hemorrhages. Another is through direct propeller strikes that can result in blood loss, lacerations or amputations. But science tells us that when ships slow down to 10 knots or less, they are much less likely to kill a right whale."

The shipping industry opposed the rule when it was originally enacted, in part because they claimed it would result in a significant economic burden on the industry.

"But we know [from] reports that have been issued since the rule went into effect that the impact was much less significant than they had claimed it would be," Monsell says. "There's also an exemption in the rule. In the interest of safety, if the captain of the boat thinks that it would endanger his or her crew to slow down in a particular area because of ocean conditions or other factors, they don't have to slow down."

Beyond ship strikes, right whales face a host of other problems, including entanglement in fishing gear. That's the second major issue that the Center for Biological Diversity is trying to tackle, both through the courts and administrative petitions to the National Marine Fisheries Service.

"Like ship strikes, there are very common sense measures that the agency can take to help protect these animals from getting tangled up and seriously injured or killed in commercial fishing gear, including closing important right whale habitat areas to vertical lines and promoting the transition to ropeless fishing gear."

Kristen Monsell, senior attorney, Center for Biological Diversity

“Like ship strikes, there are very common sense measures that the agency can take to help protect these animals from getting tangled up and seriously injured or killed in commercial fishing gear, including closing important right whale habitat areas to vertical lines and promoting the transition to ropeless fishing gear,” Monsell says.

In addition, warming waters, due to climate change, are shifting the location of the whales’ ocean prey. “We’re seeing right whales go into habitat areas where they haven’t traditionally been found,” Monsell explains. “There are no protections in place in those particular waters, which is increasing their rate of entanglement.”

Related: [Endangered right whales have moved because of climate change — into dangerous waters](#)

All of this has led to significantly longer calving intervals — the time period between births of baby right whales. “A healthy right whale will have a calving interval of about three years,” Monsell notes. “Now, that calving interval is up to about 10 years, which is another reason why this species is doing so poorly.”

Scientists estimate that if current trends continue, the species could be functionally extinct within the next 20 years, Monsell says. But while the situation is dire, “we can save these animals.”

“We know what needs to be done,” she insists. “We just need the political will to do so. [We] are very hopeful that with the Biden administration coming in, the tide will start turning for right whales and we’ll see the population increase again, rather than the significant unsustainable decline we’re seeing right now.”

This article is based on an [interview](#) by Bobby Bascomb that aired on [Living on Earth](#) from PRX.