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Speeding Ships Kill Too Many Whales

It's time for the federal government to enforce speed limits in coastal habitat

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Jan 26 · 4 min read

Blue whales are the biggest animals that have ever existed on Earth. But these beautiful behemoths are no match for today's massive cargo ships, which strike and kill even the biggest whales with sickening regularity along all of America's coastlines.

Ship strikes are a leading cause of whale deaths on both the East and West coasts. Yet the federal government has resisted implementing the one tool that can effectively prevent these needless deaths: mandatory speed limits through whale habitat, including the coastal areas as ships approach California ports.

That's why, earlier this month, the Center for Biological Diversity (where I work) filed separate lawsuits on both coasts to force the feds to adopt common-sense measures to reduce the risk of ship strikes. Our federal government has a moral and legal obligation to protect these amazing animals from continuing to get run over and killed by ships.

On the East Coast, just over half of known or suspected deaths of critically endangered North Atlantic right whales since 2017 have been attributed to vessel strikes, closely followed by entanglements in fishing gear. Last year two of only 10 baby right whales born were killed by vessel strikes off the coasts of Florida and New Jersey.

On the West Coast, federal records document at least 27 whales struck by ships in California over the past three years, including a dead fin whale draped across the bow of a container ship as it entered San Francisco Bay in 2018.

But that's just the tip of the iceberg. Scientists say the actual number of whales killed by ship strikes could be 20 times larger than official reports, since most dead whales sink. Some of the offending ships are so big, and pack so much force when speeding, that they kill whales without ever feeling it.

The biggest cargo ship to visit the U.S. East Coast in 2020 was longer than four New York City blocks and wider than a football field at 167 feet (51 meters) wide. It has a current draft — or depth of water required — of 47 feet. As I type, it's in the Mediterranean, traveling at 19 knots to arrive in New York in ten days.

For perspective, in 1825 sailing vessels used to transport cargo had a maximum draft of 10 feet. In 1955 cargo vessels had an average draft of 25 feet. But today, container ships may have a draft of 50 feet or more. Fast-moving, deep-draft vessels are particularly dangerous to whales.

Humpback whales, especially calves and juveniles, are highly vulnerable to ship strikes. They are often active at the surface, slapping the water with fins or breaching, making wondrous sights for whale watchers. Younger whales spend more time at the surface, are less visible, and closer to shore, making them more susceptible to collisions. Pregnant female right whales and mothers with nursing calves are also especially at risk of vessel strikes given their tendency to spend more time at the water's surface.

What happens to these whales when faced with enormous vessels steaming through prime feeding grounds?

Many are hit by the vessels. Internal injuries, like broken bones or organ damage, may not be visible if the whales die and wash ashore. Others have visible gashes. But most injuries and deaths go uncounted because the whales' bodies sink and the vessels' pilots are unaware of the collisions.

But there is evidence that a female blue whale, one known because she had been sighted more than 20 times since 1987, narrowly avoided a container ship in Southern California traveling at 11.3 knots. Researchers off Long Beach had placed a suction cup on her with an instrument to measure location. When a large ship passed perilously near, the researchers were relieved to see her surface unharmed.

Slowing ships has been shown to greatly reduce the chances of a lethal ship strike, and that appears to have worked here. The whale interrupted her ascent at the last minute and changed course to avoid the extremely close container ship. Her age and earlier experiences with ships (even an incident capsizing a small boat) may have helped avoid the ship, but also the ship was going slower, which reduces air pollution and whale collisions.

The scientists concluded that while whales have some cues to avoid ships, this is true only at close range, under certain oceanographic conditions, and if the whale is not otherwise distracted by feeding, breeding, etc. They noted that this whale might not have been so lucky had the ship been going faster.

To prevent collisions between whales and ships requires slowing ships and directing them away from hotspots where whales are feeding or migrating. Innovative technology combined with new science can predict where whales are based on oceanographic conditions. Satellite information allows tracking of ship's locations, speeds and destinations.

We know where the whales are and where the ships are. It’s up to us to make the changes necessary to keep them out of each other’s way.