



Fisheries and Oceans
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NORTH ATLANTIC RIGHT WHALE

A science based review of recovery actions for three at-risk whale populations



SUMMARY REPORT

Canada

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A science based review of recovery actions for three at-risk whale populations - a commitment of the Government of Canada's Oceans Protection Plan

In November 2016, the Government of Canada announced its [Oceans Protection Plan \(OPP\)](#), which outlined several new initiatives aimed at addressing threats to populations of marine mammals in Canadian waters. Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) was asked to conduct a science based review of the effectiveness of the current management and recovery actions for three at-risk whale populations: the Southern Resident Killer Whale (SRKW), the North Atlantic Right Whale (NARW) and the St. Lawrence Estuary Beluga (SLE Beluga).

As the first step in this review, DFO scientists assessed the overall effectiveness of the recovery actions undertaken to date at reducing the key threats to these whales. They also identified areas for immediate improvement in recovery efforts and priorities for new or enhanced efforts, most of which could be initiated within five years. These two elements make up the scientific assessment of recovery actions for each whale.

Now, we are engaging the Canadian public, Indigenous communities, government agencies, environmental groups, industry representatives and other key partners and stakeholders to hear their views and gather support for the priority actions identified by scientists. The scientific assessment, in addition to the feedback we receive during this engagement, will inform recommendations to the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans Canada for enhanced recovery efforts for these whales.

Priority management actions for the North Atlantic Right Whale (NARW)

This document summarizes key findings of the scientific assessment of the effectiveness¹ of recovery measures undertaken to date to support recovery of the NARW and the identified priority management actions. The complete scientific assessment report on the NARW [can be found online](#) and contains background information on the history of recovery measures completed to date, the threats affecting the species, and prioritized recovery actions.

The scientific assessment is distinct from the recovery planning and reporting processes outlined in the *Species at Risk Act (SARA)* (2002); however it similarly focuses on the threats to the species as identified in the [Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada's \(COSEWIC\) status report \(2013\)](#) and it builds on the recovery measures identified in the [Recovery Strategy for the NARW in Atlantic Canadian Waters \(2014\)](#) (the Recovery Strategy) and those of the proposed [Action Plan for the NARW in Canada: Fishery Interactions \(2016\)](#). To this foundation, it adds an assessment of the effectiveness of the actions implemented to date at abating threats, the most recent scientific knowledge, and a description of the latest population trajectory for the species in order to identify priorities for immediate action. The science based review for this species under the OPP is an opportunity for the federal government and its partners to enhance recovery efforts for the NARW.

¹ The effectiveness of an activity is considered in terms of its ability to reduce the threat(s) to the population.

The Current State

NARW are migratory animals that reside in Atlantic Canadian waters during the summer and early autumn (particularly in the Bay of Fundy, Gulf of Maine, and Scotian Shelf) with recent sightings in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. In Canada, they have been listed under SARA as Endangered since 2005. In 2015 the population was estimated at 524 individuals and most recent assessments indicate declining health and abundance. This species is particularly vulnerable as the majority of NARWs spend most of their lives within 160 km of the heavily populated eastern coast of North America and are exposed to multiple types of human activities.

Recovery of the species is considered feasible. The recovery goal is:

“... to achieve an increasing trend in population abundance over three generations.” (As stated in the Recovery Strategy.)

Given the long generation time of the species, a positive trend would need to be observed over at least 60 years to satisfy this recovery goal. Multiple human induced threats are impeding recovery. These include vessel collision, entanglement in fishing gear, acoustic disturbance and disturbance from the presence of vessels.

The Way Forward

The scientific review confirmed that entanglement in fishing gear is a significant threat currently affecting NARWs. Vessel strikes also affect the population; however, some recovery actions have already been taken to reduce the risk of collision and have resulted in fewer observed deaths from this threat. Other threats include disturbance from noise and the presence of vessels, exposure to contaminants, and changes to food supply.

The scientific assessment identifies priority management actions that are anticipated to help reduce human pressures on this species. Priority actions are organized by threat and by their ability to directly or indirectly abate that threat, in no order of priority. The complete scientific assessment report on the NARW also contains recommendations for priority research based actions to support the management actions, and provides further context for the management based actions presented here.

Priority actions to directly reduce the threat of entanglements from fishing gear

(In no particular order)

- A. Remove fishing gear from critical habitats by implementing spatiotemporal closures to fishing activities in critical habitats when North Atlantic Right Whales are present.
- B. Remove fishing gear from other high-use areas by implementing spatiotemporal closures of fishing activities when North Atlantic Right Whales are present.
- C. Remove rope from the water column by implementing ropeless gear fisheries in areas where North Atlantic Right Whales occur thereby partially removing the threat.
- D. Continue to support, increase capacity and implement response to North Atlantic Right Whale entanglement events.

Priority actions to indirectly reduce the threat of entanglements from fishing gear

(In no particular order)

- E. Implement gear marking and gear retrieval programs to provide information allowing the identification of the source of the gear (i.e. the specific fishery) and the type of lines (e.g. endlines versus groundlines) involved in the entanglement.
- F. Implement gear reporting (including when, where, and how much gear is being set) as a requirement for industry.

Priority actions to directly reduce the threat of vessel collision

(In no particular order)

- G. Remove vessel traffic from Grand Manan Basin critical habitat² by amending the Bay of Fundy Traffic Separation Scheme so that it no longer intersects the Grand Manan Basin critical habitat.
- H. Remove vessel traffic from other high-use areas by restricting vessel transit through other identified high-use areas (e.g. potentially the Gaspé region in the Gulf of St. Lawrence).
- I. Implement vessel speed restrictions in the vicinity of critical habitat and other high-use areas when North Atlantic Right Whales are present.

² Under the federal *Species at Risk Act (SARA)*, critical habitat (CH) is the habitat that is necessary for the survival or recovery of listed extirpated, endangered, or threatened species, and that is identified as CH in a recovery strategy or action plan.

Priority actions to indirectly reduce the threat of vessel collision

- J. Remove vessel traffic from Roseway Basin critical habitat by promoting awareness through further Notices to Mariners and monitoring the Roseway Basin Area to be Avoided to ensure compliance.

Priority actions to indirectly reduce the threat of acoustic disturbance

(In no particular order)

- K. Remove vessels from critical habitats to decrease the level of vessel noise to some degree in the critical habitat, thereby decreasing the threat of acoustic disturbance (though the extent that noise levels will be decreased is not currently known, and the close proximity of major shipping traffic to the critical habitats even once vessels are removed from the area will still result in some level of vessel noise exposure).
- L. Remove fishing activities from critical habitats to decrease to the level of vessel noise to some degree in the critical habitat, thereby decreasing the threat of acoustic disturbance (though the extent that noise levels will be decreased is not currently known, and the close proximity of major shipping traffic to the critical habitats even once vessels are removed from the area will still result in some level of vessel noise exposure).

Priority actions to directly reduce the threat of vessel presence

(In no particular order)

- M. Remove vessels from critical habitats to decrease exposure to vessel presence, thereby decreasing the threat of vessel-presence disturbance.
- N. Remove fishing activities from critical habitats to decrease the threat of vessel-presence disturbance.