A Species of Greatest Conservation Need in the Massachusetts State Wildlife Action Plan
Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife

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Northern Right Whale
*Eubalaena glacialis*

State Status: Endangered
Federal Status: Endangered

**DESCRIPTION:** The Northern Right Whale can reach to 16 meters in length and weigh up to 70 tons. This rotund baleen whale has a stocky black body, lacks a dorsal fin, and has a narrow and strongly arched rostrum. The species has callosities (raised patches of rough skin) on the rostrum, chin, above the eyes, and behind the blowhole. Most individuals have white patches on their abdominal area, but the majority of the whale is black to dark gray. Identification in the field is assisted by a characteristic V-shaped blow. The Northern Right Whale has up to 250 baleen plates on each side of the upper jaw, measuring about two meters long and fringed with fine hairs.

**RANGE:** Northern Right Whales usually occur from the Bay of Fundy south to northern Florida, but individual whales may disperse beyond these limits. Different parts of their range are used for different purposes, including distinct feeding areas, calving areas, nursery aggregation areas, and breeding locations. Historically, the Northern Right Whale occurred in all the world’s oceans. They primarily inhabit coastal and shelf waters, moving to higher latitudes during the spring and summer.

**DISTRIBUTION IN NEW ENGLAND WATERS:**
Northern Right Whales concentrate in Cape Cod Bay and the Great South Channel east of Nantucket Island in small numbers from December to March, and in larger numbers in April and May. These areas are important feeding grounds for the species because of the unusually dense concentrations of zooplankton. Few Northern Right Whales remain in Massachusetts waters throughout the summer; the majority of the population spends summer and fall in the Bay of Fundy and on the Nova Scotian shelf. Right whales move south to warmer waters off the coast of Georgia and Florida to calve.

**LIFE HISTORY AND ECOLOGY:**
Northern Right Whales live to at least 50 years of age. The closely related Bowhead Whale in the North Pacific may live over 100 years. Females give birth to their first calf at 10 years of age, with the gestation period lasting approximately 12 months. A calf can be up to 4.2 meters long at birth. Northern Right Whales are occasionally observed from the beaches of Cape Cod in the spring, where they generally feed on zooplankton, including copepods, euphausiids, and cyprids. Northern Right Whales sometimes feed by skimming prey from the surface of the water as they swim through a patch of plankton with their mouth open. They then use their tongue to force the water through a patch of fibrous plates hanging from the upper jaw, while retaining the zooplankton in their mouth.

Parasitic amphipods called whale lice heavily infest the callosities of the Northern Right Whale, sometimes giving their heads a yellowish-white patchy appearance. Although there is no definitive evidence of Killer Whale predation on Northern Right Whales in the north Atlantic, about 5 percent of the population exhibit...
parallel raking scars on their tail flukes, which match the
dentition of the Killer Whale.

**POPULATION STATUS:** The Northern Right Whale
is listed as Endangered under both the federal and state
endangered species acts. From the early 1500s to the
1920s, these whales were extensively hunted in the
western North Atlantic. A full prohibition on hunting
began in 1935. It is believed that the western North
Atlantic Right Whale population now includes about 450
individuals. The eastern North Atlantic Right Whale
population is nearly extinct, with numbers only in the
low tens of individuals. Currently, ship collisions and
entanglement in fishing gear are the two most important
causes of mortality.

**STRANDED WHALES:** For all live or dead marine
mammal strandings, please call one of the following Hot
Lines:

For Cape Cod:  508-743-9548
  IFAW Marine Mammal Rescue and Research

For areas near Boston:  617-973-5247
  New England Aquarium

For all other areas:  978-281-9300
  National Marine Fisheries Service, Gloucester

Be prepared to provide the following information:
  - Name and contact number
  - Location of animal with detailed description and
    nearby landmarks, if possible
  - Number, size, and type of animal
  - Any other helpful information such as behavior
    or tidal cycle

Keep a safe distance away from the animal. For mass
strandings of two or more animals and large whales, the
International Fund for Animal Welfare will establish an
incident command system where respondents will have
logo gear and/or vests.

For all dead marine mammals, please describe:
  - If the carcass is marked with grease pen or
    tagged, note the tag’s color, number, and
    position on the animal

Though every carcass cannot be removed due to budget
limitations, it is required by law that data and samples be
collected from every dead marine mammal that comes to
shore.

**REFERENCES:**
North Atlantic Right Whales (*Eubalaena glacialis*). Office of
Protected Resources, NOAA Fisheries. URL:
http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/species/mammals/whales/
north-atlantic-right-whale.html

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