

# Right Whale Population Down 30 Percent Over Past Decade

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The North Atlantic right whale population has shrunk by 30 percent over the last decade, capped off by a roughly 8 percent annual decline to an estimated 336 whales remaining in 2020, the North Atlantic Right Whale Consortium announced Monday.

The population estimate of 336 right whales is the lowest for the endangered species in nearly 20 years, the group said, and is thought to include fewer than 100 breeding females. The species had an estimated 481 whales in 2011 but the count has been on the decline since.

“We are obviously discouraged by this estimate, but quite frankly, not surprised,” said Heather Pettis, associate scientist at the New England Aquarium’s Anderson Cabot Center for Ocean Life and executive administrator of the consortium. “The right whale research and conservation communities know that while widespread efforts to change the trajectory of the species have been undertaken, they have not been enough.” Right whales got their name, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration said, “from being the ‘right’ whales to hunt because they floated when they were killed.”

Nantucket and New Bedford thrived as whaling ports in the 18th and 19th centuries, but the expeditions that helped fuel the Industrial Revolution severely depleted whale populations. Northern right whales have been listed as endangered since 1970. Now as New Bedford and other former New England whaling ports aim for revitalization through the offshore wind industry, the developments are facing headwinds from two

federal lawsuits that focus on the protection of endangered species like the North Atlantic right whale and commercial fishing interests.

Nantucket Residents Against Turbines, a group opposed to the Vineyard Wind I project that is expected to come online in 2023, in August filed a federal lawsuit seeking to stop its construction, arguing that several federal agencies violated laws intended to protect endangered species like the right whales. NOAA Fisheries on Monday afternoon announces an extension on its voluntary right whale “slow zone” after the Northeast Fisheries Science Center’s vessel survey team on Sunday observed the presence of right whales south of Nantucket. The slow zone, where mariners are asked to avoid or transit at 10 knots or less, is in effect immediately and expires on Nov. 8, 2021.

“North Atlantic right whales are on the move along the Atlantic coast of the U.S,” NOAA said. “NOAA is cautioning boaters and fishermen to give these endangered whales plenty of room. We are also asking all fishermen to be vigilant when maneuvering to avoid accidental collisions with whales and remove unused gear from the ocean to help avoid entanglements. Commercial fishermen should use vertical lines with required markings, weak links, and breaking strengths.”