

North Pacific Right Whale (*Eubalaena japonica*)

North Pacific right whales, like right whales in the North Atlantic Ocean, were severely depleted by commercial whaling and are now among the world's most endangered mammals (Fig. 5). Two populations are thought to survive, one in the western North Pacific off Russia and the other in the eastern North Pacific off Alaska. The status of both populations is poorly known. The western population is thought to number in the low hundreds although reliable information to support that estimate has not been published. The eastern population appears to number a few tens of animals, making it the most endangered marine mammal population in U.S. waters.

Early in the 1960s the eastern population apparently numbered in the low hundreds and presumably was recovering slowly. However, between 1962 and 1967 Soviet whalers killed more than 350 animals in the southeastern Bering Sea and Gulf of Alaska, despite an international ban on the hunting of all right whales. It appears that this illegal whaling virtually eliminated the population. Between the late 1960s and the mid-1990s sightings of right whales in the eastern North Pacific were rare, widely scattered, and almost always involved solitary animals. Then, in the summer of 1996, a group of four animals was reported in the southeastern Bering Sea. Each year since then, the National Marine Fisheries Service has undertaken aerial, shipboard, and/or acoustic surveys of the area during the summer.

Results of those surveys have yielded sightings of between 3 and 13 whales per year in a 60-by-100-nmi area about 200 nmi north of Unimak Pass in the eastern Aleutian Islands. Although more than 40 whales have been involved in the various sightings since 1996, many of those have probably included resightings of the same individuals.



Figure 5. The deviated nostrils of right whales, including this North Pacific right whale, create a V-shaped blow that is unique among cetaceans and is useful in identifying species in the field. (Photo by Richard LeDuc, courtesy of the National Marine Fisheries Service.)

Photo-identification techniques have identified only 13 individuals in the Bering Sea as of the end of 2002. Along with three other eastern North Pacific right whales photo-identified in other areas (one off San Clemente Island, California, in 1992; one off the southern Baja Peninsula, Mexico, in 1996; and the third off Kodiak Island, Alaska, in 1998), the total number of known individuals is 16. Biopsy samples have been collected from 10 individuals, nine of which have been males. During 2002 six sightings of between one and three animals were recorded, including one sighting of a cow-calf pair. The latter sighting is particularly noteworthy because it is the first confirmed report of a right whale calf anywhere in the North Pacific Ocean since the early 1900s and included the only known female identified in the population to date.

Critical Habitat Petition

The annual sightings of right whales in the same area of the southeastern Bering Sea in recent years suggest that the area is a summer feeding grounds for what remains of this population. Based on this information, the Center for Biological Diversity wrote to the National Marine Fisheries Service on 4 October 2000 to petition that a large portion of the southeastern Bering Sea be designated as critical habitat for right whales under provisions of the Endangered Species Act. The Service found that the petition provided sufficient scientific information to warrant consideration and published a *Federal Register* notice on 1 July 2001 requesting comments.

As noted in its previous annual report, the Commission responded to the request on 11 July 2001. In its letter the Commission noted that the repeated right whale sightings in recent years along with historical whaling records from that area provide a reasonable basis for concluding that the petitioned area contains features essential for the population's survival. Given experience with North Atlantic right whales, it also noted that entanglement in commercial fishing gear and collisions with ships could be potential threats to eastern North Pacific right whales. The Commission therefore recommended that the Service proceed with designating the area as critical habitat with a view toward modifying its boundaries at a future date as better data on the population's distribution become available. To improve information in this

regard, the Commission also recommended that the Service initiate a study to tag right whales in the southeastern Bering Sea with satellite telemetry tags to track their movements and habitat-use patterns. It also recommended that the Service (1) examine photos of North Pacific right whales for scars that might indicate interactions with fishing gear or collisions with ships, and (2) assess the extent to which gillnets and crab traps that might entangle right whales occur within the petitioned area during the summer months when the whales are present.

On 18 September 2002 the Service responded to the Commission's letter noting that, although it had not yet decided how to proceed on the petitioned action, it was considering the use of satellite telemetry but did not plan to carry out such a study until it reviewed concerns raised by some scientists about the effects of tag implants on North Atlantic right whales. It also noted that it had found no evidence of scars from interactions with either fishing gear or vessels in any of the right whale photographs taken in the southeastern Bering Sea.

On 20 February 2002 the Service published a *Federal Register* notice announcing that it had determined that the petitioned action to designate critical habitat for eastern North Pacific right whales was not warranted at this time. The notice advised that, although the Service recognized the designation may be a prudent action, it concluded that the extent of critical habitat could not be determined because essential biological requirements of the population were not sufficiently understood. It therefore advised that it would continue to analyze issues raised by the petition following the completion of planned 2002 right whale surveys and research.

Marine Mammal Commission Review

During the Commission's 8–10 October 2002 annual meeting, representatives of the Service provided information on the status of North Pacific right whales and results of the 2002 field surveys. The surveys, which involved aerial, shipboard, and acoustic survey techniques, were more extensive than those used in past years. They expanded the search area from a core 60-by-100-nmi sighting area to a broader area covering surrounding waters in the southeastern Bering Sea and the northern Gulf of Alaska. As noted above, six sightings were made of 1–3 whales each, including a cow-calf pair, all of which were within the core area. Hydrophones

documented numerous right whale vocalizations in the core area during the course of the surveys; however, efforts to locate many of these vocalizing whales were unsuccessful, and it was not possible to determine the number of whales present. There were no sightings and no whale vocalizations heard in waters outside the core area.

No steps were taken to deploy satellite telemetry tags during the 2002 field season. The Commission was advised that the Service now considered such tagging to be the highest priority research need for eastern North Pacific right whales and apparently is satisfied that such tagging can be done safely. Unfortunately, the Service also advised that it had been unable to schedule shiptime on one of its vessels to study North Pacific right whales in 2003.

Based on this information, the Commission wrote to the Service on 27 November 2002. In its letter, the Commission recommended that, if the Service is unable to dedicate one of its own vessels to tag and survey right whales in the southeastern Bering Sea in the summer of 2003, the Service provide such funding as may be needed to charter a vessel to carry out that research. As of the end of 2002 it was not clear whether and what research might be undertaken during 2003.