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Response to Corkeron et al. “*Balaenoptera ricei* is also the Gulf of Mexico whale”

Corkeron et al. (2022) suggested that the common English name proposed for the new species, Rice's whale, *Balaenoptera ricei*, was not the best choice. Instead, they recommend the English common name “Gulf of Mexico whale,” suggesting that this locational name would create more interest and “...could enhance the sense of responsibility for people who live along the Gulf and in the rest of the United States.”

As the species description was being written, a variety of avenues for choosing an English common name were considered, including a name based on geography, historical figures, oceanographic features of the northern Gulf of Mexico, taxonomic consistency, and morphological features of the whales themselves. We considered “Gulf of Mexico whale” and our conclusion was that it was too generic. There are, 12 different species referred to as “whales” in the northern Gulf of Mexico including Rice's whale, sperm whale (also listed under the Endangered Species Act), three beaked whale species, and seven others. Calling *B. ricei* the Gulf of Mexico whale would be the equivalent of calling the North Atlantic right whale the “North Atlantic whale.” There are many other whale species in the North Atlantic and this name would create ambiguity. For those involved in management and conservation efforts and who work with the public and stakeholders in the Gulf of Mexico, there was, and remains, significant concern that the common name Gulf of Mexico whale could result in confusion rather than clarity in the species recognition. In addition, having such a focused geographic name could create the opposite effect of that proposed by Corkeron et al. (2022). It could exclude communities away from the Gulf and reduce global interest in the species.


Unlike the International Code of Zoological Nomenclature (ICZN), which is a formal convention providing a Code and mandatory rules for arriving at a Latin species name, there is no formal regulating body for common names. From the standpoint of the Endangered Species Act however, the common name plays a role in regulatory and legal actions, and it is not desirable to have multiple common names within regulatory documentation.

It has been more than a year since the species description was published and the common English name Rice's whale proposed (Rosel et al., 2021). There have since been extended efforts to get the message out about Rice's whales including updating federal websites (e.g., messaging on National Marine Fisheries Service¹ and National Data Buoy Center websites), updating the large whale sighting hotline for reporting Rice's whale sightings, and providing web stories.² We have given many outreach presentations to K–12 students both in the Gulf region and across the country, to New England whale watching naturalists, and others to educate the public on the plight of Rice's whales. The name has been used in scientific presentations that are now published in abstract books, used in published articles, and cited in other publications. There have been four scoping sessions with stakeholders in the research, industry, and nongovernmental organization sectors, as well as state and federal agencies as part of the Rice's Whale Recovery Planning Workshop. All these efforts and projects have used the name Rice's whale and with these efforts over the past year, the public is now becoming familiar with the name Rice's whale.

We agree with Corkeron et al. (2022) that Rice's whales require timely actions to ensure their survival. Success of these efforts depends, in part, on consistent messaging. The English common name for the species has already undergone multiple changes from Bryde's whale to Gulf of Mexico Bryde's whale to now Rice's whale. Introducing another name, or sustaining multiple common names, particularly following a year of concerted effort to engage stakeholders and raise public awareness of Rice's whales, would sow confusion to the detriment of ongoing and future efforts to protect and conserve this unique and critically endangered species.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Patricia E. Rosel: Conceptualization; supervision; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Laura Engleby:** Writing – review and editing. **Lance P. Garrison:** Writing – review and editing. **Jenny A. Litz:** Writing – review and editing. **Keith D. Mullin:** Writing – review and editing. **Melissa S. Soldevilla:** Writing – review and editing. **Mridula Srinivasan:** Writing – review and editing. **Lynsey A. Wilcox:** Writing – review and editing. **Tadasu Yamada:** Writing – review and editing. **Barbara J. Zoodsma:** Writing – review and editing.

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ENDNOTES

¹ <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/species/rices-whale>

² <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/southeast/marine-mammal-protection/how-gulf-mexico-brydes-whale-became-rices-whale>
<https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/southeast/endangered-species-conservation/trophic-interactions-and-habitat-requirements-gulf-mexico>

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