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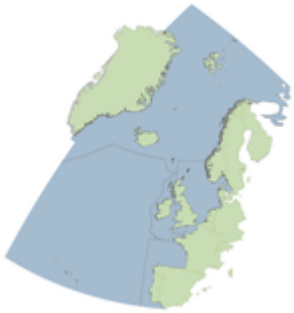
Status Assessment 2020 - North Atlantic Right Whale

The North Atlantic Right whale is extirpated in the OSPAR area, with all confirmed sightingattributed to individuals from the very small West Atlantic right whale population. Main direct threats to this species within its extant range are entanglement and ship strikes. It is unknown how climate change will affect Right whales. Chances of a recovery in the OSPAR area are non-existent in the short term.



OSPAR QSR2023

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Northern right whale Status		Distribution		Population size (historic)		Demographics		Status
Region	I	←→	1,2	↓	1,2	?		Poor
	II	←→	1,2	↓	1,2	?		Poor
	III	←→	1,2	↓	1,2	?		Poor
	IV	←→	1,2	↓	1,2	?		Poor
	V	←→	1,2	↓	1,2	?		Poor

Northern right whale Threats/Impacts		Entanglement		Shipping including ship strikes		Climate change and its indirect effects		Evidence of threat or impact
Region	I		1		1		2	Good
	II		1		1		2	Good
	III		1		1		2	Good
	IV		1		1		2	Good
	V		1		1		2	Good

⊞ Table Legend

⊞ Method of Assessment

Background Information

- Year added to OSPAR List: 2008 (OSPAR 2009)
- Case report: https://www.ospar.org/documents?v=7099 (https://www.ospar.org/documents?v=7099)
- Key criteria: severe decline due to whaling, mainly before 1800. IUCN lists the species as endangered.
- Sensitivity: long-lived species, small population, sensitive to entanglement, ship strike, underwater noise, pollution and climate change and its direct and indirect consequences.
- Key anthropogenic pressures: entanglement, ship strikes, underwater noise, pollution, climate change, including its indirect consequences such as changes in feeding conditions.
- Last status assessment and brief outcome: OSPAR (2008; 2010). There is good evidence of a long-term decline in populations in the eastern Atlantic, and good evidence of anthropogenic threats in the small remaining western Atlantic population.

Geographical Range and Distribution

The species used to occur in the North Atlantic, with currently only a few hundred individuals remaining in the western part of the species range.

Population/Abundance

The western Atlantic population numbers some 400 animals, with at the most 100 reproducing females.

Method of assessment: 1 and 2

Condition

Not relevant: East Atlantic population functionally extinct.

The West Atlantic population consists of around 400 animals and currently is not recovering due to human-caused mortality (Corkeron et al. 2018), in particular deaths of adult females (Fujiwara et al. 2001).

Threats and Impacts

In the past, whaling was the main threat to the species (Thomas et al 2015, Monsarrat et al 2016), however, currently the main direct threats to the species' survival are entanglement (e.g. Knowlton et al. 2012) and ship strikes (Sharp et al. 2019). Given the current population size, the survival of every animal, especially reproducing females, is important (Fujiwara et al. 2001). Habitat loss is also important, with the species relying on areas close to shore: Impacts of fishing activities that alter ecosystem structure is a concern for right whales. Climate change could have profound effects on prey density and distribution; right whales depend heavily on areas with high densities of suitable prey (mostly calanoid copepods) (e.g. Meyer-Gutbrod 2018, Record et al. 2019). Persistent organic pollutants can have important negative effects on the immune system and reproduction, as the species is long-lived, has a thick blubber layer and lives close to shore for a large part of its life. The effect of extreme population depletion may include reduced genetic diversity.

Measures that address key pressures from human activities or conserve the species/habitat

Other relevant competent authorities are IWC, NAMMCO, Arctic Council (CAFF in particular) and IMO.

Other relevant competent authorities are IWC and IMO.

Actions of OSPAR related to climate change and pollution might benefit the species.

For the western Atlantic population (local, national) measures include those preventing entanglement and disentanglement action, and measures with regards to shipping (adjustment of shipping lanes and speed restrictions).

The overview assessment of implementation reporting was not available at the time of publishing this status assessment. Future updates of the status assessment will take implementation reporting against OSPAR actions into account.

Conclusion (including management considerations)

The eastern Atlantic right whale population is functionally extinct, and there is no chance of a restoration in the short term (e.g. Brown 1986). Measures of OSPAR with regards to pollution and climate change may indirectly benefit the species.

OSPAR recognizes that the IWC is the main international organization in charge of protecting large whales in the world and assessing their status. Also, given the occurrence of the species (remaining western Atlantic population) close to shore, responsibility to take action lies with those nations.

Knowledge Gaps

Knowledge about the species in the OSPAR area is limited to a very low number of sightings that can often be attributed to individuals of the western North Atlantic population (e.g. Jacobsen et al. 2004).

Context & Guidelines

Guidance on the Development of Status Assessments for the OSPAR List of Threatened and/or Declining Species and Habitats

OSPAR Agreement 2019-05e (https://www.ospar.org/documents?v=40966)

⊞ References

Sheet reference:

BDC2020/Right whale

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