



The Facts about North Atlantic Right Whales (March 2026)

FACT	PROOF
1: North Atlantic right whales are critically endangered.	North Atlantic right whales (<i>Eubalaena glacialis</i>) are a <u>critically endangered</u> and <u>genetically unique</u> species with <u>fewer than 400</u> alive today.
2: Accidental fishing gear entanglement is the biggest threat to North Atlantic right whales.	Entanglement in fishing gear is the leading cause of <u>death</u> and <u>serious injury</u> to right whales..
3: Right whale entanglement deaths are mostly unobserved.	Studies estimate that humans observe only <u>36% of right whale deaths</u> . Entanglements can cause malnutrition and <u>poor body condition</u> ; entangled whales often sink after death and are not documented. <i>Example:</i> Right whale #3346 Kingfisher was <u>severely entangled</u> in Maine lobster gear in 2004. He carried rope <u>around his right flipper</u> for 11 years, <u>has not been seen</u> since 2015, and is presumed dead — but is not counted as a whale killed due to entanglement.
4: Most of the gear entangling North Atlantic right whales is unrecovered, unmarked, and unidentified.	Entanglements cause injuries that leave scars, and researchers detect entanglement events by <u>identifying new scars</u> in photographs of right whales. Since 1980, over <u>1,900 entanglement events</u> have been detected with this analysis. Most (92%) of these entanglements were detected based on scars alone. For the cases with attached gear (8%), the origin of most rope remains <u>unknown</u> .
5: Entanglements can cause chronic stress that impacts individual and population health.	Entanglement injuries range in severity, from <u>minor to life-threatening</u> . Nearly <u>90 percent of right whales have been entangled</u> at least once; some as many as nine times. Chronic stress from entanglements can impair right whale <u>growth</u> , development, and <u>reproductive success</u> .
6: Right whales use the waters off Maine for feeding, breeding, and traveling.	Through increased <u>survey</u> and <u>passive acoustic monitoring</u> efforts, right whales have been detected <u>every month of the year</u> in waters where Maine lobstermen fish. A persistent aggregation of <u>> 90 right whales</u> was seen off Maine in January 2025.
7: The vertical buoy lines on trap and gillnet gear are an entanglement risk to right whales.	Maine’s lobster fishery has the <u>greatest density of unattended vertical fishing rope</u> in U.S. waters, which pose an <u>entanglement risk</u> in areas where whales and fishing gear overlap
8: Gear marking for in-state and federal waters helps identify areas for targeted management.	Maine lobster gear must be color marked depending on where it is set: <u>purple marks</u> on inshore gear (since 2020) and <u>purple-green marks</u> on offshore gear (since 2022). Prior to these requirements, identifying gear to a specific state’s fishery was not possible.
9: A North Atlantic right whale died from chronic entanglement in rope from Maine lobster gear.	Three-year old female right whale #5120 <u>died in 2024</u> after a two-year entanglement in Maine lobster gear with purple-marked rope.
10: Rope from Maine lobster gear regularly entangles other large whale species.	From 2020-2024, <u>161 large whales</u> , including right, humpback, and minke whales, were seen with entanglements. Only 30 of these cases had rope that was recovered and identified. Whales were entangled in purple-marked rope from Maine state or federal waters in <u>11 of the 30 cases</u> .
11: Solutions exist to keep fishermen fishing while protecting whales.	Lower breaking strength rope (<u>weak rope</u>) and <u>weak inserts</u> can reduce the severity of an entanglement. <u>On-demand (ropeless) fishing gear</u> prevents entanglements by removing endlines until hauling. Maine has a <u>gear lending program</u> for fishermen to <u>test on-demand gear</u> for compensation. The Coalition advocates that on-demand gear should be available to fishermen free of charge.