

Maritimes North Atlantic Right Whale Stakeholder Workshop

March 24, 2021

Meeting Summary

Introduction and purpose

On March 24, 2021, the Canadian Wildlife Federation hosted a North Atlantic Right Whale (NARW) Stakeholder workshop in Halifax, Nova Scotia. This workshop was a continuation of the NARW entanglement workshop held in Halifax on October 15, 2020. Seventy-three participants (listed at the end of this report) attended in-person or online via Zoom.

The purpose of this meeting was to continue discussions related to right whales, expanding participation to include the shipping industry so that all those interested in or affected by NARW management measures could be involved. The goal was to continue to improve everyone's knowledge of the NARW situation, and to discuss further actions that could mitigate risk from both entanglements and ship strikes.

All participants were encouraged to participate in the discussion. This workshop enabled us to discuss the effectiveness of current management measures considering the declining population of NARW and to identify the usefulness of this group going forward.

Updates and discussion

Updates were given on NARW population status, news and reports, US and Canadian management measures, and new science and knowledge. The following discussion points were raised on each of these updates:

1. Population estimates:

- The apparent discrepancy between cause of death/number of carcasses reported in necropsy reports versus total numbers reported was explained based on a recent scientific study that estimated the annual number of unobserved whale deaths. Explanations for large reductions in population estimates during recent years despite relatively few observed carcasses were also discussed.
- Limitations of long-term tagging/microchipping were discussed. There was interest to encourage the development of a long-term, non-harmful tag that might help this.

2. News and reports:

- Participants questioned the process of determining gear origin and biological impact of gear removed from entangled whales. Through the discussion it was suggested that a broad range of fish harvesters should be involved in gear investigations rather than only DFO staff, and that a clear procedure for gear identification should be developed for Canada and the US.

- In Canada, DFO Conservation and Protection take possession of the gear to examine and investigate its origin. It was suggested that gear should be reviewed by a trusted working group after C&P finishes their investigation.

3. 2021 NARW management measures:

Gear modifications

- The details of the implementation of fishing gear modifications required by DFO was clarified: implementation of four types of gear modifications (interlaced marking/tracers, weak links, weak sleeves, time tension line cutter) will begin at the end of 2022, but these will be implemented based on region-specific testing and may not involve all modifications. Implementation of these modifications is not intended to be a 'blanket approach'.

Closures

- It was clarified that a whale sighted on day 9-15 of a dynamic closure in the Gulf of St. Lawrence will be treated as a possible stable aggregation and will result in cells currently part of a dynamic closure being converted to a seasonal closure. Sightings prior to day 9 within a dynamic closure do not extend or convert the existing closure. It was noted that shipping lanes could be cleared and re-opened, but fishing areas could not be after a certain period.
- Participants spoke in favour of making the Cabot Straight Voluntary Slowdown area mandatory and season-long (May through December) as this is the route which NARW enter and exit the Gulf of St. Lawrence. The Shipping Federation of Canada noted that mandatory rules provided better consistency for the operation of the shipping industry.
- Fishers from several communities noted that the notices of fishing area closures communicated by DFO last season were difficult to use due to frequent updates and incompatible coordinate formatting. It was suggested that DFO add numbers to the notices to indicate more clearly which notice is most recent. It was noted that as detections in dynamic closures prior to day-9 will no longer trigger new announcements, notices are expected to be reduced.

Outside Canada

- Despite collaboration and surveillance, there are few sightings of NARW in the eastern North Atlantic.
- New proposed measures for US fisheries (state and federal) are outlined in the Draft Environmental Impact Statement released by NOAA in December 2020.

4. Recent science:

- Though the NARW population has been smaller in the past, it was clarified that the greatest concern is that the current rate of decline is larger than ever recorded, and that their food source seems to be declining, even in the Gulf of St Lawrence.
- Many participants were interested to know how the diminishing sea ice coverage in the Gulf of St Lawrence may affect *C. finmarchicus*. This was noted as an important research question.

There was discussion of what could and should happen if a significant number of NARW are killed or injured in Canada during 2021 as has happened in recent years. The following ideas were proposed:

1. Voluntary vessel speed restrictions should become mandatory and more strongly enforced throughout the area.
2. Necropsies should be immediately undertaken on all carcasses as early as possible.
3. Allow the use of ropeless gear by commercial fishers in areas closed due to NARW sightings.
4. Consideration should be given for compensating fish harvesters for lost fishing opportunities due to closures.

Conclusion

During the conclusion, participants acknowledged that discussion and collaboration between the diverse stakeholders at these workshops is very valuable. The knowledge and thoughts shared at these workshops have been used by CWF to inform our communications with government regarding NARW regulations. These discussions have also helped the research community identify important research projects.

Following the workshop, all participants were provided with the presentation slides, links shared on Zoom during the workshop, and the published studies referred to during presentations and throughout the day. A survey was also provided the week following the workshop to gather more guidance and suggestions from participants. A large majority expressed willingness to attend another workshop to continue to discuss the role of and impact on the many stakeholders affected by NARW in the Maritimes.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the PEW Charitable Trusts, the Canada Nature Fund for Aquatic Species at Risk, and the Canadian Wildlife Federation for providing funding for this event. We would also like to thank everyone for their time attending this workshop and for those who completed the follow-up survey. Your feedback is important and will be used to plan the next workshop.