



November 6, 2017

The Honourable Justin Trudeau
Prime Minister
House of Commons
Ottawa, ON K1A 0A6

Dear Prime Minister Trudeau,

The North Atlantic Right Whale Consortium, established in 1986, consists of numerous Canadian and U.S. organizations and individuals that study right whales and have an interest in the recovery of the species, including scientists, federal and state managers, conservationists, representatives of marine industries, and other stakeholders. The Consortium curates several databases for monitoring the status and health of the population, and it holds an annual meeting to disseminate information about the species. On rare occasions, the Consortium Board reaches out to policy makers to inform them of particular issues facing right whales. With this letter, we seek to alert you to the critical status of the species. We applaud the efforts of the Canadian government in closing the snow crab fishery and establishing mandatory emergency ship speed restrictions in the Gulf of Saint Lawrence this summer, and we urge you to preserve and, where appropriate, expand these efforts to prevent right whales from declining further toward extinction.

North Atlantic right whales are highly endangered with a very small population size of approximately 451 individuals. The population has been declining for the past 7 years (since 2011). There are only about 100 adult (breeding) females left, and at current rates of mortality, all of these 100 females will be dead in just 21 years. The species will be functionally extinct in less time. The stakeholders who comprise the North Atlantic Right Whale Consortium are extremely concerned about the fate of the species, and maintain that the urgency of this problem warrants immediate action to reduce human-caused mortality. Any delays in mitigating these mortalities will reduce the likelihood of recovery by right whales, since every lost female removes both that female from the population as well as all of the calves that she would have had in the future.

Extensive mortality investigations have shown that adult right whales die exclusively from fishing gear entanglements and ship strikes. Right whales do not live to old age, as humans often do, but are killed prematurely; females reach sexual maturity by age 10 and are typically killed between the ages of 20 and 30, long before their expected natural lifespan of 70+ years. The rate of mortality has been increasing rapidly in recent years and it now far surpasses calving rates, which is causing the current 7-year decline in the total

number of right whales. In 2017 alone, we have documented 16 mortalities, but only 5 births. Furthermore, these documented mortalities are a significant underestimate of actual mortality; for every known death, there are an additional 2-3 deaths that go undetected. ***The current rate of mortality is unsustainable, and because the number of breeding females is so small, we will destroy this species' capacity to recover in less than 15 years if human-caused mortality is not reduced immediately.***

Because right whales die early, females do not have the chance to have many calves in their short lifetimes, which is accelerating the decline of the species. Moreover, females that have been entangled in fishing gear are less likely to have calves than females that have not been entangled. This is particularly disturbing considering 85% of all right whales bear scars from having been entangled at least once in their lives, and over half the population has been entangled at least twice. In addition to contributing to mortality directly (by killing whales), fishing gear entanglements are responsible for depressing right whale calving rates.

In recent years, right whales have both changed their distribution and moved more often between known habitats and other areas along the eastern seaboard of the U.S. and Canada. Although not well understood, these changes may be in response to a changing distribution or abundance of food. The increased energy required to swim long distances to find food and the possible reduction in food availability suggest that female right whales may not be getting sufficient nutrition to successfully give birth, which would also depress calving rates. Although we cannot control these changes, right whales are resilient and will likely adapt; however, their ability to do so is severely compromised by chronic human-induced stresses from fishing gear entanglements.

Right whales are in serious trouble, and the prospects for recovery without immediate action are exceedingly dim. We have no reason to believe that right whale mortality rates will decrease without broad-scale changes in fishing and shipping practices. Calving rates could see modest improvements in the future, but they are not expected to be particularly high because (1) the sub-lethal effects of entanglements on calving rates will only increase with time (as a higher percentage of the population becomes entangled), and (2) the environmental changes hypothesized to be affecting calving rates could persist for years to decades. ***We cannot depend on right whales to increase their calving rates to fix this problem.*** Only significant reductions in both human-caused mortality and the sub-lethal effects of entanglements will save right whales from extinction.

The concerns of the Consortium are well supported by peer-reviewed published research, with multiple studies on different aspects of right whale population size, health, and human-induced risks all indicating a species in crisis due to human activities in the ocean. Despite the fact that the Consortium is largely a science-based organization, we do not contend that more research is needed to understand the effects of fishing and shipping on right whales. What is required now is bold and swift action to reduce fishing gear entanglements and ship strikes. ***We urge you to take seriously the warning signs of an impending extinction.*** The individuals and organizations that comprise the North Atlantic Right Whale Consortium stand ready to partner with government and industry to address this problem with solutions that are on hand today. Please do not hesitate to call on us as we work together to save right whales.

On behalf of the North Atlantic Right Whale Consortium,

Mark Baumgartner, Chair, *Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution*

Scott Kraus, Vice-Chair, *Anderson Cabot Center for Ocean Life at the New England Aquarium*

Heather Pettis, Executive Administrator, *Anderson Cabot Center for Ocean Life at the New England Aquarium*

Moira Brown, Board member, *Canadian Whale Institute and Anderson Cabot Center for Ocean Life at the New England Aquarium*

Genevieve Davis, Board member, *University of Massachusetts Boston*

Caroline Good, Board member, *Duke University*

Tim Gowan, Board member, *Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission*

Philip Hamilton, Board member, *Anderson Cabot Center for Ocean Life at the New England Aquarium*

Robert Kenney, Board member, *University of Rhode Island*

Amy Knowlton, Board member, *Anderson Cabot Center for Ocean Life at the New England Aquarium*

William McLellan, Board member, *University of North Carolina Wilmington*

Lyne Morissette, Board member, *M – Expertise Marine*

Rosalind Rolland, Board member, *Anderson Cabot Center for Ocean Life at the New England Aquarium*

Brian Sharp, Board member, *International Fund for Animal Welfare*

Christopher Taggart, Consortium member, *Dalhousie University*

Julie van der Hoop, Board member, *Aarhus University*

Sharon Young, Board member, *The Humane Society of the United States*

cc:

The Honourable Dominic LeBlanc, Minister of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard

The Honourable Marc Garneau, Minister of Transport