

**North Atlantic Right Whale Recovery Plan**  
**Southeast U.S. Implementation Team, May 10-11, 2023**  
Guana Tolomato Matanzas National Estuarine Research Reserve in  
Ponte Vedra, FL

**KEY OUTCOMES MEMORANDUM**

**I. Overview**

The North Atlantic Right Whale Recovery Plan Southeast U.S. Implementation Team (SEIT) conducted a two-day meeting on May 10 and 11, 2023 at the Guana Tolomato Matanzas National Estuarine Research Reserve in Ponte Vedra, Florida. The SEIT's Forum was conducted from 9:00 am to 5:00 pm on May 10 and was open to the public. The Forum agenda was planned with input from the SEIT in order to facilitate priority information updates and discussion with participants and SEIT members. The SEIT deliberated from 8:30 am to 3:30 pm on May 11, 2023 and focused on the following primary objectives:

- SEIT Business
- Forum Review
- Review previous SEIT priorities/ 5 year plan and discuss vision
- Outreach updates and next steps

Agendas from both days are attached. This Key Outcomes memorandum summarizes the primary results of the SEIT deliberations on May 11, 2023. In general, the synthesis integrates the main themes discussed at the meeting and are presented in five main sections: Overview, Participants, Meeting Materials, Key Outcomes, and Next Steps. The Key Outcomes section is further segmented into the following sections:

- Welcome and Meeting Kick Off. This section provides a brief overview of meeting purpose and agenda review.
- SEIT business
- Focused SEIT discussions
- Consensus Actions. This section summarizes consensus recommendations of the SEIT.
- Other. This section summarizes other topics discussed during the meeting.

**II. Participants**

The SEIT meeting was attended by Team members: Lance Garrison, Mike Getchell, James Johnson, Hardee Kavanaugh, Amy Knowlton, William McLellan<sup>1</sup>, Leslie Ward-Geiger (Team Lead). Katie Moore<sup>1</sup> attended via teleconference. John Baxter was unable to attend. Laura Engleby, Clay George, and Kara Shervanick represented NOAA Fisheries (NMFS) Southeast Regional Office (SERO), Protected Resources Division. Diane Borggaard<sup>1</sup>, represented the Greater Atlantic Region Fisheries Science Office, Protected Resources Division.

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<sup>1</sup> W. McLellan and K. Moore are also NEIT members. D. Borggaard is the NMFS liaison to the Northeast Implementation Team (NEIT).

### **III. Meeting Materials**

The following materials were provided to SEIT members via email prior to the meeting:

- The 2-day meeting agenda

### **IV. Key Outcomes**

Below is a summary of the main topics and items discussed during the meeting. This summary is not intended to be a meeting transcript and is not necessarily in chronological order of discussions.

Rather, it provides an overview of the main topics covered, the primary points and options raised in the discussions, and areas of full or emerging consensus.

#### **A. Welcome and Meeting Kick Off**

This was the SEIT's first in-person 2-day meeting since the pandemic; Team welcomed. Virtual meetings were held since May 2020 (over 90 participants attended the May 2022 virtual meeting including several NEIT members to help facilitate IT coordination). The meeting kicked off with a brief review of the meeting purpose and agenda.

During the Day 1 Forum: Laura Engleby acknowledged various staffing changes in SERO.

- Barb Zoodsma retired and the responsibilities from her position were subdivided into multiple roles.
  - Kara Shervanick – NMFS Southeast Right Whale Coordinator.
  - Clay George – NMFS Large Whale Recovery Program Coordinator
- Additionally, LCDR Steven Solari replaced LCDR Rosemary Abbitt as the NMFS Southeast Right Whale Maritime Liaison.

#### **B. SEIT Business**

The SEIT discussed possible dates and format (in-person vs. teleconference) for the fall SEIT meeting and in light of scheduled meetings including the Consortium and the 2023 North Atlantic Right Whale Festival. SEIT summer check-in call was scheduled for July 18 9:00 – 10:30; fall meeting format will be decided at that time.

There was discussion on how best to reflect key points from Forum presentations in the Key Outcomes Memo which included a suggestion to request a paragraph or highlighted points from presenters and include in Key Outcomes, and to include C. George's opening remarks from May 10 on state of right whales and conservation. There was discussion around sharing PPT's with SEIT ahead of Forum meetings.

There was general discussion on topics for joint NEIT/SEIT webinars in between meetings, particularly on topics that span full Team focus such as PET (population evaluation tool team) updates and products and a potential DFO webinar.

## C. Focused Discussions

### i. Forum Review

L. Ward-Geiger reviewed day 1 presentations to facilitate Team deliberations. Deliberations included the following key points related to forum presentations:

- **Disentanglement efforts:** C. George presented on disentanglement efforts during the 2022-2023 season which included open-water response-related videos and gear details from the cases of right whales #3812 'Nimbus' and #1218 'Argo'. The Team recognized that these disentanglement responses rely on SE efforts that involve human risk, time, and resources, and that outcomes are difficult to predict. Both of these whales arrived in the Southeast U.S. (SEUS) entangled in trap/pot gear that was later determined to have been of Canadian origin. In both cases, fishery origin was determined by a joint NOAA/DFO investigation and was aided by gear marking and other requirements established by DFO. These joint efforts and DFO's gear marking and reporting requirements should be applauded and encouraged. In the case of Argo, the gear had been reported missing by the fisher as required by Canadian law and this information aided in understanding the timeline of events. The investigation found that Nimbus may have been entangled in derelict or "ghost" gear from a previous season highlighting the importance of derelict gear recovery programs. These recent cases continue to reinforce that prevention of entanglement is critical given the significant consequences of entanglement related impacts to the species. The SEIT remains very concerned about the population status of the NARW and in particular survival and health of reproductive females. Good mitigation steps have been taken but there is more that must be done. Some discussion followed on what more could be done such as encouraging the use of sinking groundlines and "weak rope" in the Canadian trap/pot fisheries as soon as practicable.
  
- **Monitoring efforts:** Various presentations during the forum sparked discussion of aerial survey and passive acoustics monitoring efforts and the SEIT's interest in the status of the NMFS right whale monitoring plan. Key discussion points are as follows:
  - NMFS to discuss plan, when available, with SEIT and other partners.
  - Timely information on NARW distribution shifts is one objective per L. Garrison.
  - This past season underscores the importance of aerial detection of entanglements and M/Sl.
  - SEIT previously conducted a prioritization process regarding aerial surveys- this could be updated if SERO requested.
  - A team member suggested monitoring daily ship traffic arrival/departure schedules which are variable and could help focus mitigation/surveillance efforts.
  - Team discussion on Florida Fish and Wildlife Research Institute's (FWRI) projection models to help refine surveys, outreach and messages. Analytical work ongoing, team interested in progress updates.
  - Team interested in updates from acoustics research– how persistent are acoustic patterns/diurnal vocalizations? Previously noted that mother/calf pairs vocalize quietly.
  - Health assessment discussion (photogrammetry, biopsy sampling, etc)

- Photogrammetry: Can we get reliable girth estimates in reduced water visibility? Imagery on partially submerged whales. Noted Health Workshop had taken place. What is the actual question: Pre- vs post-parturition body condition
- **River incursions:** The Team reflected on this season's river incursion event. Regarding the topic of river incursions team members suggested to focus the initial response plan on Jacksonville and use as a model to focus elsewhere. A member noted that regional military personnel rotates and therefore continual education and plans are needed to effectively support future events and that the pre-season coordination meetings will be helpful in this regard. The need for a tabletop exercise approach was mentioned. Action item: K. Shervanick to send H. Kavanaugh draft of 2023 event details. Suggestion: annual November port meetings would be a good time to remind local port constituencies about potential for whales to enter rivers, actions that can/should be taken. Regarding inlets: K. Moore will look into how USCG Auxiliary flotillas are organized, related to whale sightings near inlets and crossings. L. Engleby mentioned prior use of aerial banners but noted procurement issues.

## **ii. Team discussion on previous 5-year Action Plan for North Atlantic right whales in the SEUS**

### **Major Plan Topics:**

1. Vessel-related impacts
  2. Cumulative Effect of Non-Lethal Impacts/Ocean Noise
  3. Population Assessment and Monitoring, Framework
  4. Emerging fisheries, Reduce or Eliminate Entanglements
  5. Mid-Atlantic Plan (previously shared with NEIT)
- L. Ward-Geiger lead team discussion, stepped through the above plan topics, including the following 2022 SEIT recommendations provided to SERO and shared with the Forum:
    - Develop and circulate consistent messaging about the risk that whale collisions pose to whales, boats, and passengers. Encourage boaters to reduce their speed when operating in nearshore Atlantic Ocean waters during the NARW calving season.
    - Improve enforcement of regulated vessels > 65 ft that are not complying with speed restrictions.
    - Meet with fishing tournament organizers to provide information about the critical status of the NARW species, improve understanding of current tournament practices including schedules, and develop Best Management Practices to reduce risk to whales.
    - Develop dockside education programs in locations with high boat/NARW occurrence, like St. Augustine, to encourage outreach and communication between wildlife managers, boaters, marina operators and other stakeholders.
    - Work with state and federal law enforcement to do active outreach to encourage boaters to reduce their speeds and take other proactive measures voluntarily.
    - Create a standing multi-organizational working group that focuses on expansion of meaningful and timely steps to continually engage with recreational boating interests regarding NARW recovery and to keep pace with changes in boating practices.
    - Further evaluate collision risk to whales from regulated yacht traffic and unregulated recreational vessel traffic in the SEUS.

- Inlets are a convergence passageway for vessels and are areas of particular concern. Consider approaches to reduce risk particularly near inlets such as increasing enforcement “escorts” for whales based on timely sighting information.
- Team members shared information on plan implementation, identified accomplishments as well as ongoing work/concerns, and assessed if there were ideas they had not previously considered or that they wanted to bring forward for further consideration in the next 5-year SEUS Action Plan. Some deliberation points included:
  - Population Evaluation Tool subgroup will present final report to joint Implementation Teams’ when available. SEIT remains interested in the progress of NOAA’s Monitoring Plan and priority objectives. Team members discussed the various current population model approaches, if and how they are aligned, and the need for routine processes to get interpreted population information out and available.
  - Federal agency representatives on the SEIT should investigate and share their agencies’ anticipated activities in the SEUS over the next few years as it relates to the plan. J. Johnson will share an update on Jacksonville Shallow Water Training Range (JSWTR) implementation activities (as it related to NARWs) in the fall.
  - Team recognized various work on recent risk analyses conducted in SEUS, some presented at Forum meetings. A. Knowlton reported on wound forensic study and timeframe on deliverable including a manual that will help necropsy teams and others make inferences about vessel-related wounds. FWRI will summarize long-term data collected regarding whale-vessel interactions during surveys and characterize potential behavioral responses. Team is interested in advancement of FWRI’s risk evaluation models and models forecasting whale movement. A member described interest in a large regional scale operational risk model, depict smaller boat risk in near term (green, amber, red). Members underscored interest in key vessel information within OLE reports and how to get timely information (i.e. vessel size, props, speed). A member reiterated concerns about chronic noise in the marine environment (and how to assess the effects of chronic sounds on a population), another member mentioned newer ship designs are quieter, changes in industry unfolding.
  - Need for fine-tuned messaging for mariners, whales out of habitat -discussed USCG and NOAA coordination. Two messages:
    - Special incident message developed by USCG and NOAA for special incidents...When an event occurs (e.g., whale near inlet in S. FL), NOAA requests USCG to broadcast it
    - Routine seasonal message typically broadcast at the top of the hour
- Per previous meeting and currently; need to consult with NMFS experts on climate change and conduct a regional vulnerability assessment for NARW, regional action plan.
- BOEM and NMFS Draft North Atlantic Right Whale and Offshore Wind Strategy can be found on-line; Team interest in knowing opportunities to comment on various aspects of the development of projects and the monitoring and mitigation plans.

#### **D. Consensus Actions**

- 1) Promote importance of consistent, available outreach messages. Interagency communications team expected to meet.
- 2) L. Ward-Geiger will share previous SEIT 5 year plan with team, and Team will continue discussion of progress and next plan/priorities in SEUS.
- 3) K. Shervanick to share river incursion information with SEIT; identify participants for discussion of plan; and share plan accordingly.
- 4) K. Moore to explore auxiliary flotilla organizational process and report back.

#### **E. Other**

- Team requested to include a summary of C. George's SEIT presentation as an appendix to the SEIT Key Outcomes (see below).

#### **II. Next Steps**

- Team members will continue to consider key threats and information gaps to aid in formulating the next 5-year action plan. Send information to L. Ward-Geiger and prepare for Fall meeting.
- SEIT conference call will be conducted in July.

### III Appendix

#### C. George's opening remarks to the SEIT Forum about North Atlantic right whale status & conservation, May 10, 2023

- Welcome Back
  - A lot has happened in the 4 years since our last in-person SEIT Forum meeting: Right whales reeling from UME and 3 bad calving seasons in a row, 2 calves and 1 mom struck by vessels off GA & FL in 2020-2021, new NMFS lobster rule in 2021, proposed vessel speed rule 2022, increased Canadian involvement, and Barb Zoodsma's retirement.
  - But two things didn't change: Southeast field work continued despite challenges of COVID 19 pandemic; agencies and partners kept working together on right whale recovery...just more virtually than before.
- Status of North Atlantic Right Whales
  - Despite these efforts, the situation for the species is dire.
  - All of the growth that occurred since 2003 has been undone in 2 decades (Fig. 2a).
  - The species is still declining and growth rates strongly negative (Fig. 2b).
  - This is due to a combination of high human mortality & injury, indirect effect of climate change on whale food and calving, and intrinsic issues (small pop size, genetics).
- ...But There Are Glimmers of Hope
  - In 2020 (most recent year with estimates), the birth rate exceeded mortality rate for the first time since 2013 (Fig. 4).
  - Mortality rates appear to be falling back to pre-UME levels.
  - Management implemented by Canada after 2017 & 2019 seems to be working.
  - Models indicate the species can stabilize--and hopefully recover--if human causes of mortality are curtailed.
- Hard Work Ahead
  - Today we're going to hear a lot about the challenges facing right whales (entanglements, other human impacts), but these challenges can also be opportunities (e.g. ropeless fishing gear).
  - Curtailing vessel strikes, fishing rope entanglement and other human impacts will not be easy because it will require stakeholders to behave differently, and to think about right whales differently...or maybe for the first time at all.
  - "Wildlife management is 90 percent about people and 10 percent about animals" (Jack Ward Thomas, chief of U.S. Forest Service, 1993-1996).
  - Do we care enough about right whales to do the difficult things that will be required to save them?
- Stakeholder Groups are Crucial for Recovery
  - Stakeholder groups, like the SEIT forum, are critical to recovering endangered species, because they provide a platform for 2-way communication between agencies and stakeholder groups.

- Much of the meeting will focus on the recent calving season's findings and agency updates.
- But it's also an opportunity for stakeholders to ask the agencies questions, express their concerns, and provide ideas.
- With that in mind please speak up today and contact [clay.george@noaa.gov](mailto:clay.george@noaa.gov) and [kara.shervanick@noaa.gov](mailto:kara.shervanick@noaa.gov) any time after this meeting.

Figures referenced in Clay's powerpoint presentation, from NMFS's 2022 Draft Stock Assessment report, which can be accessed at <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/national/marine-mammal-protection/marine-mammal-stock-assessment-reports>.

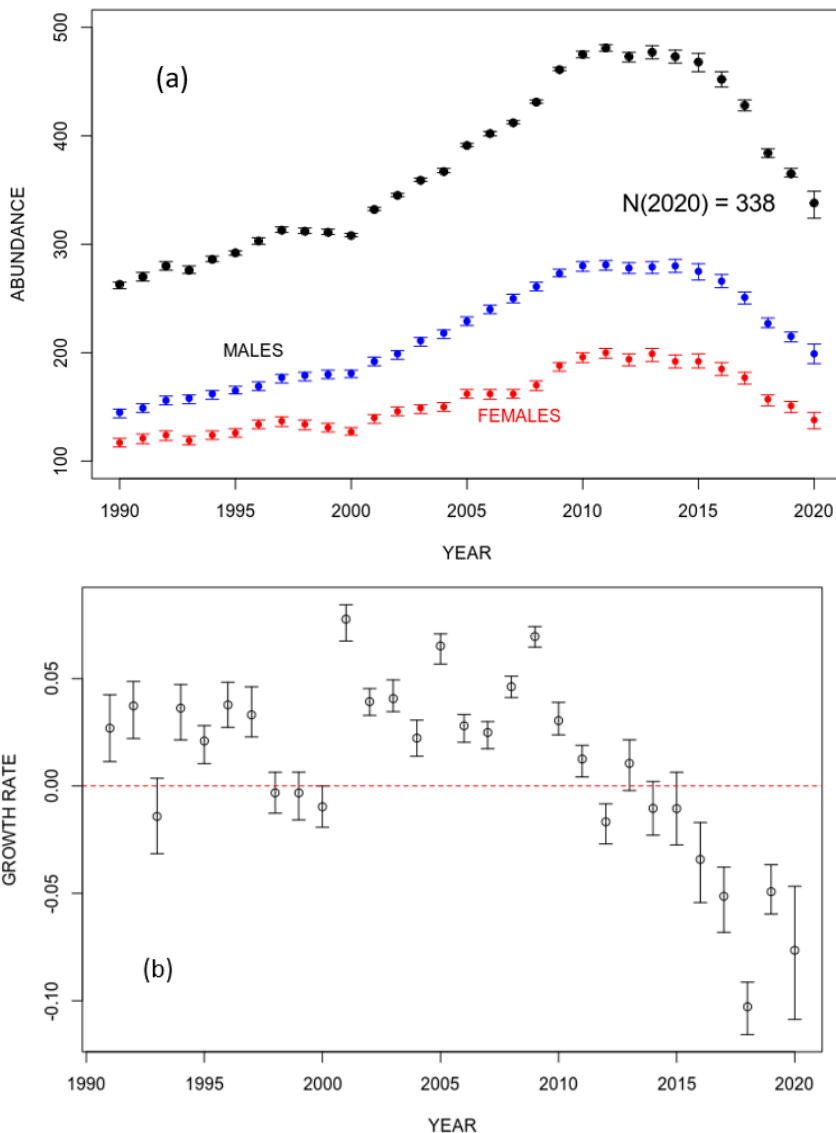


Figure 2. (a) Abundance estimates for North Atlantic right whales. Estimates are the median values of a posterior distribution from modeled capture histories. Also shown are sex-specific abundance estimates. Cataloged whales may include some but not all calves produced each year. (b) Annual growth rates from the abundance values. All graphs show associated 95% credible intervals.



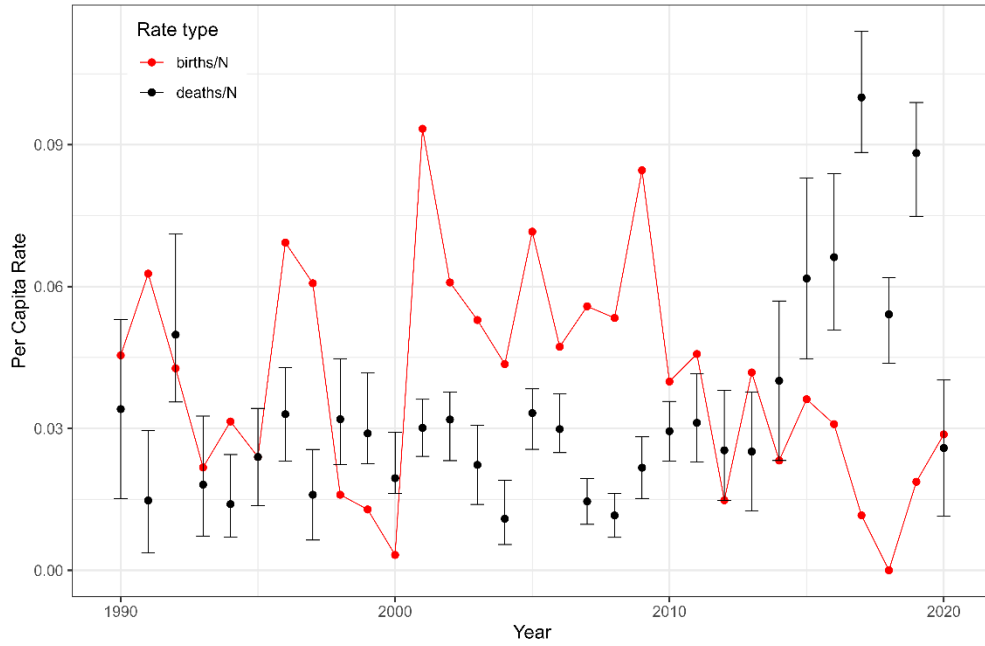


Figure 4. North Atlantic right whale per capita birth (red line, closed circles) and death rate with associated 95% credible intervals, 1990-2020.